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## ENCOUNTERS WITH THE MILITARY: TOWARDS A FEMINIST ETHICS OF CRITIQUE?

### INTRODUCTION

This conversation grows from a panel held at the IFJP conference in May 2013, when we started talking about our experiences of conducting fieldwork with or around the British military, and the methodological and ethical issues these experiences raised. The panel revealed some pertinent shared experiences and topics worthy of further discussion, in particular in relation to issues around the importance of fieldwork for international relations and for feminist critical military studies, notions of insider/outsider status and the civil-military divide, and the ethics of critique. This was such a fruitful, inspiring and reassuring panel, which created such a fantastic space to share successes, failures, concerns, and strategies that confronted the experience of *doing* research on such a rich and complex institution as the military, that we wanted to continue in the hope that we can open up yet more, wider conversations<sup>1</sup>.

To contextualise our positions before we go on, it seems appropriate to include some brief details about the nature of each person's work. Catherine Baker, after joining a research project on languages and the military as a postdoctoral researcher, conducted more than 50 oral history interviews during the course of the project with former peacekeepers and civilian linguists who had been involved in peace operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Victoria Basham researches issues of gender, race, class and sexuality in the British armed forces and has carried out focus groups, one-to-one interviews and ethnographic research with a broad range of members of the military community. Sarah Bulmer's doctoral research investigated attitudes towards sexuality within the Royal Navy, and her current project engages with war veterans in Britain. Harriet Gray's ongoing PhD

research focuses on intimate partner abuse in the British military community, and involves in-depth, semi-structured interviews with victim-survivors, perpetrators, and support staff working in a range of capacities, both military and civilian. Alexandra Hyde's PhD research is an ethnography of a British Army regiment based overseas, from the perspective of women married to servicemen, which involved six months' participant observation living on a military camp in Germany. Drawing on these experiences, we came together to discuss some of the issues raised and to reflect upon how they continue to frame our identities and our practices as researchers in the broad field of critical military studies.

### **CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF A MILITARY KIND**

Alexandra Hyde (AH): I've just written down in capital letters the idea of 'encounters' - we've all had very different encounters with the military. Encounters implies a kind of immediacy and an experiential aspect to *doing* the research, conducting fieldwork – the dynamics of travelling to a place or being in the room with research participants, meeting people face to face. The idea of 'encounters' also speaks to something responsive for me, it allows for the fact that our experiences are bound to be subjective.

Victoria Basham (VB): Yes; this idea of 'encounters', of physically going and interacting with people and doing fieldwork, is something that I'm really keen to reflect on. Sarah and I have been talking recently about how a lot of the work in international relations that we've read, including a lot of feminist work which is really valuable and interesting, seems somehow devoid of people. It's not that they are missing altogether of course. Mainstream IR is populated by insights from and into the actions of elite actors, and more critical work, particularly feminist scholarship, sheds necessary light on the diverse lived conditions of possibility of different social actors. However, fieldwork is still somewhat of an anomaly in IR. As a result, I'm often left wondering if the stories we tell are too

'neat' and where the messiness of people's lives has gone. I think that these questions are also to do with critical military studies as a field that is particularly enriched by fieldwork. Not to try and draw boundaries around it or to suggest that critical military studies isn't anything that doesn't involve fieldwork, or even that fieldwork is always better or always necessary, but, given that we've all done fieldwork and that a lot of people in IR actually don't do fieldwork, what does that mean? I think there is an interesting methodological pluralism inherent in broadly critical ways of engaging with the military; a desire to engage with people in interpersonal situations that comes with asking critical questions about the military writ large.

Sarah Bulmer (SB): I agree with Victoria. I worry that we spend an awful lot of time talking about the challenges and problems that fieldwork brings, and of course, it does. But it is precisely in the discomfort, the unease, and the ethical quandaries that these encounters with the military are so valuable.

Harriet Gray (HG): For me, fieldwork - in terms of involving people in the research that I do - is a really important part of doing feminist critical military studies. This is because dominant ideas about militaries, what they are for, and how they should/do work, are so often de-personalised in that they are removed from the level of people and their everyday interactions. We talk about big strategic concepts as if they have nothing to do with people, as if they could exist independently of our own beliefs and actions. In addition we talk about these concepts as if they are un-gendered, whereas they seem to me to be deeply embedded in gendered ideas, and this gendering plays a central role in their normalisation. In deciding to do fieldwork, what I'm trying to do is to look at the level of everyday interactions within the family and to draw links between these mundane gendered performances and larger, supposedly inevitable structures and strategic concepts. Following Enloe (2000, 3), I want to argue that we cannot fully understand the larger structures of militarism without taking seriously the gendered configurations of everyday life upon which they rely. And this is what

I'm trying to do under the umbrella of critical military studies; to challenge our de-personalised assumptions by looking at their reliance on the level of the personal everyday, and showing how this then changes the fundamental questions we need to be asking.

AH: And thinking about 'the field' and everyday social relations has really important implications for interdisciplinary research methodologies – for example in introducing ethnographic or sociological approaches to research that is also intended to address concerns (and audiences) within IR as a discipline. I'm very aware of having conducted what ended up being a very conventional ethnography in many ways, and the challenges of remaining alert to the kind of power relations and perspectives an ethnography can reproduce. One interesting aspect of the traditional ethnographic approach of my project was its location in-a-place-called-overseas. This was crucial for what I wanted to draw out about how the Regimental community re-assembled and re-constructed its physical, national, social and cultural boundaries. But in the sense that I've now returned from 'the field' and am 'writing up' my ethnography, it's quite easy for me to fall into the trap of looking back on my fieldwork as if it was sealed off in another time and place. That's an interesting dynamic in itself when part of my argument is about the paradoxical conditions of fluidity and fixity that characterise 'army life' and create a range of what I'm calling *militarised mobilities*. It raises the possibility that some of my experiences and attitudes have come to mirror those of my research participants: many people spoke about intense but transient friendships created in the geographical and temporal moment of a posting, which neither party expects to endure for example. But as the narrative I write freezes the research participants in a certain time and place, my time 'in the field' represents a very short period in the cycle of deployments and postings for the military families who move on to the next one and continue to live that reality.

Catherine Baker (CB): I'm thinking about the methodological dimension of our encounters - there are differences in duration and degree of embodied immersiveness among the methods we've each

used. But even an encounter that is short in terms of time can involve an intense and intimate rapport (maybe the very act of deep listening almost requires that), and the affective politics of that encounter don't necessarily dissipate immediately afterwards just because the encounter didn't go on for very long. And then of course there's all the 'corridor talk' that one experiences as a researcher, which is a different dimension of encounter in a way (as in it's not something we've made happen for the sake of getting 'data' as a result of it).

AH: Yes absolutely, encounters can spill over beyond the official time or place where they are 'conducted'. And they can exist in many different forms – the official and the unofficial encounter, the interview in someone's home versus their office; or fieldwork encounters that are embedded in the everyday life of participant observation (for example, my encounters with the military include running a cake stall and taking part in a 'Fitness Fiesta' weekend). The idea of spillover is interesting in relation to research on the military specifically – it reminds me of militarisation as a way of understanding the depth and scope of military power, how it spreads, the transformations it entails and the vectors of power it works with, such as gender of course. Except that spillover implies the existence of a boundary that is breached, which I guess leads to some interesting reflections on the nature of the (false?) division between the military and civilian.

VB: One of the things that struck me while the rest of you were talking is that although the research I did was quite a long time ago - in terms of that kind of very entrenched embedded ethnographic style - it's because of that work that I've had so many more encounters with the military community since. My first experience of researching the military continues to shape all the subsequent encounters I've had and indeed, often enables them to happen. When I meet with veterans through work I'm doing with activist groups, for example, I have a language that I'm able to share with them; there is a sense that I understand their world to some extent, or at least as far as a civilian can expect to. Whether it's with military personnel, veterans, defence journalists, civil servants, policy

works, or antimilitarist activists and campaigners, it's become clearer to me that the initial encounters I had with British soldiers were not 'contained' and that they cannot be confined to the past. As you become known as someone who works 'on the military', further encounters ensue and are shaped by past ones. Recently, I've had a lot of encounters with retired military personnel, defence-facing civil servants and what I consider 'military friendly' academics. At times I feel a bit like how I imagine that Carol Cohn (1987) may have done when she was researching Cold War defence intellectuals. I'm encountering all this talk about war and military strategy that is articulated in the most abstract of terms, so removed from the violence inherent to it. I'm especially fascinated by the gendered politics of this. The assumption is that only a supposedly rational, focused and highly reactive mode of thinking about the military and security is relevant and thus deserves to be listened to, deserves to inform policy, and increasingly, deserves to shape teaching and research agendas. I have noticed the validation of this kind of thinking, of the normalcy of denigrating any attempts to engage with the emotional, the complex and the reflective dimensions of war, in a number of ways recently. For example, at a conference on private military security, contractors told academics and NGO workers that their questions about profiting from war were 'inappropriate' or denied them by omission through insisting we 'return to the important issues' at hand. Another example is that in a discussion of ways to teach applied strategy, concerns about ensuring students had adequate time for careful reflection were dismissed as catering to 'gatherers' not the 'hunters' that the course aimed to recruit (a highly sloppy analogy given that hunters would have starved without gatherers). Though I am still able to maintain that my research has 'policy relevance' by virtue of my military encounters and all the encounters that they have since engendered, the promotion of the 'rational intellectual' risks positioning my own work on security, and that of many of my colleagues, as outside the realm of policy relevance and therefore beyond relevance of any kind. And yet, at the same time, as I've said, it is by virtue of having had some proximity to the military establishment that I've been privy to these conversations at all. There's a tacit assumption

that I must know relevance when I see it, that I must have tried to be relevant, even if I cannot always sustain that agenda. I am neither friend nor foe but stranger in Bauman's terms (1991) and that often elicits ambivalence over what to make of me during these encounters.

SB: But isn't this what feminist research is about? Engaging the military community in a genuine dialogue that deepens our understandings of militarisation and war, and actively intervening in those processes and subjecting them to critique – for me this is at the heart of feminist praxis. And yes, it can be uncomfortable and awkward, and there is a fine line between being complicit in military processes and critiquing them when you engage in this type of work. Personally, I look for points of connection with the people I want to engage with and go from there. For example, over the past year I have been working with a former Royal Marine who is now a researcher and counsellor of war veterans. There is a lot of synergy between us in terms of wanting to foreground the lived experiences of veterans in our research. However, his critique of the treatment of veterans by society (this includes the government and the military institution) does not extend to a critique of militarism per se, as it does for me. This isn't a problem and through working with him I have continued to question a lot of my own assumptions, it's a very productive relationship. I see him first and foremost as a *person*, not the 'object' of my research and I think this is very important. This is why the concept of 'the encounter' resonates with me, as it suggests a dialogic, exploratory and creative potentiality which is inherent to this mode of praxis.

#### **'CIVVIES' ENCOUNTER THE MILITARY: QUESTIONING THE NOTION OF A CIVIL-MILITARY DIVIDE**

HG: One of the things I think is particularly interesting about research encounters which take place in a military context is the ways in which they highlight the permeability and fluidity of what is often referred to as the civil-military divide, as well as attempts to fix these boundaries in particular ways. While none of us have served in the military ourselves it seems that our experiences of the research



encounters, and the process of negotiating access to participants in the first place, have been shaped by our own multiple and fluid locations on the scale of 'insider' and 'outsider' in relation to the military institution and to our research participants, as well as how we are positioned in terms of gender, race and class.

AH: Absolutely. I think that fieldwork highlights really well the processes of othering, of meeting across an institutional boundary (during my fieldwork I was certainly called a 'civvie' enough times to have internalised this at least a bit I think!). If all these encounters have their own rules and boundaries, then it's important to explore how they're drawn or transgressed and, ultimately, how they shape the knowledge we hope to produce. My access to the Regiment for the purposes of this research was expressly informal, negotiated through a family member. And of course this shaped my fieldwork in important ways, on the one hand helping me to gain people's trust and support for my project, on the other hand giving rise to some interesting dynamics that included a lot of conventions around rank and assumptions about class and sexuality for example.

SB: My access to the naval community was somewhere between informal and formal. I met a senior commander from one of the bases where I was hoping to do my research and he was very keen to get involved and liked the idea of building links with the university. He paved the way for me so I never had to do the official Ministry of Defence Research Ethics Committee (MODREC) process, despite some resistance from one of the managers at Royal Navy headquarters. Researching veterans, as I am doing now, is in many ways easier in terms of access because they are no longer in the military so you can approach people directly, although this is still a close-knit community and there is a need to build relationships with 'insiders'. I'm particularly interested in working with veterans because they very much embody the fluidity of this divide; are they civilian or are they military?

CB: This reflects some of my own experiences, as not all of the people with military experience who I was interviewing for the study were still serving. Access to those who had retired was different; they didn't have to go through what a serving military person would need to go through in order to get somebody's permission for you to come to visit them, for instance. This question of whether someone is civilian or military, an insider or an outsider, is something that the Bosnian interpreters I interviewed in my research had had to work out for themselves in the process of doing their jobs. They were helping soldiers fulfil their peacekeeping mission and might not have agreed with every dimension of what the mission was doing or how a soldier was carrying it out, and in some cases they were living in accommodation on the base or wearing camouflage uniform. They'd each had to think for themselves about where the borderline between 'civilian' and 'military' lay, what side of it they wanted to be on and how comfortable they were with crossing it (Baker, 2010). There was a much more sustained engagement with that insider/outsider dynamic than my own research was putting me in, but because it was so important in many of their narratives, I couldn't escape thinking about the same dynamic as it applied to me.

HG: Absolutely, this resonates with my experiences as well. My access to support workers directly employed by the military has been negotiated through official channels, including the lengthy processes of finding a sponsor within the military institution and having my plans assessed by MODREC. On the other hand, the access I've negotiated to other sections of my sample, including civilians who work for military charities and civilian (former) spouses of military personnel, has been much more informal. My experiences talking to women who are/were married to servicemen particularly reflects your thoughts on veterans Sarah. Officially they aren't part of the military so gaining access to them has been significantly simpler, but many of them have lived with or even within the institution for many years and their lives have been shaped by it in significant ways. So they're not officially 'military' (and many never have been), but it would be overly simplistic to say they're purely 'civilian' either. Relative to me, of course, both (former) military spouses and civilians

who work in service charities are very much ‘insiders’; they have knowledge of living and working with the armed forces and they speak the language of the military in ways which I simply don’t.

VB: The more I think about the military writ large, the more wary I become of those *around* the military institution. I don’t say this as a way to excuse those in the military; I’ve written about how enlisting means that one is implicated in violence, whether one sees it that way or not (Basham, 2013). Having said that, some of the most anti-militarist people I’ve ever met have been in the military or are still in the military. Through my work on militarisation, I’ve had encounters with anti-war veterans, such as Ben Griffin, a former SAS officer who has come 360 degrees from killer to pacifist. On the other hand, some of the most militaristic people I’ve met are primarily white, middle class men – and to a lesser extent women - who work in Whitehall and around it. These men and women perform war in a really interesting way, as something abstract, bureaucratic and to be dealt with decisively without sustained reflection and certainly without emotion. Ultimately, these ‘civilians’ allow violence to function in significant and terrible ways.

CB: Also, there are multiple cross-cutting factors that could create a partial ‘insider-ness’ between a civilian researcher and people in a certain sub-area of the military, yet which might mean very little outside that sub-area. For instance, I think one of the ways that I was able to generate rapport with some of the (ex) service people that I was speaking to who were linguists was because I’d learnt another language (Croatian) to a high level. That makes me a linguist, that makes me similar to them in one way, even though we are positioned in very different parts of the knowledge-using apparatus. Which is useful when you’re talking to the former Royal Army Educational Corps (now Educational and Training Services), or to others who for whatever reason have got an agenda about language. But it might not be so useful if you’re talking to somebody from a completely different branch who has less of a point of view about languages as an asset – which is this big discourse now in certain parts of the military (Lewis 2012) – but might have agreed to an interview for other reasons.

VB: Absolutely - what we have all suggested about boundaries and the ways in which they are drawn is really important. The civil-military divide shifts, reforms, and reasserts itself in some spaces and not others; it has a temporality and a spatiality to it that's constantly blurring, shifting and moving. What's really interesting is the power relations that are facilitated when the civil-military divide is invoked or when it becomes blurred and how, of course, it becomes blurred, entrenched and so on. During my doctoral research, I was mistaken for a woman soldier and sexually harassed as a result of that misunderstanding. I thought I was just out socialising with soldiers but instead something unpleasant happened that was relevant to my research questions. Those kinds of things make you question where the divide is, what it looks like and how it comes into being and contracts. I, the researcher, read the situation in one way but those around me read it very differently.

AH: Given the fluidity of the civil-military divide, then, if the boundaries between civilian and military appear far less concrete when they are encountered close up on an everyday level, and if they are transgressed or complicated in the process of doing our research, does this mean we are being militarised? If we develop professional relationships and personal friendships with military personnel, empathise with particular narratives, begin to identify with certain values? Does this impact our capacity to do critical research?

HG: This is something I worry about, in particular in light of the my official mode of access, something which – having read the work of scholars such as Enloe (2010, 1107) and Jenkins et al (2011, 44) who express concern over the ways that official access to the military institution may require researchers to adapt their language, priorities, outlook and world-view to a more militarised one – I do feel conflicted about having gained. As much as I recognise the depoliticising impact of the ideas about military specificity inherent in the reification of the civil-military divide, we need to be careful about abandoning all claims to separation if it means we end up learning to speak the

language of the military too proficiently (Cohn, 1987). A big part of doing critical military studies for me is about undermining the presumption that those are our own choices.

### **A FEMINIST ETHICS OF CRITIQUE?**

SB: Something else that interests me is thinking about how the encounter changes our ability to critique military power. I think it's important to recognise how in our role as researchers we're actually intervening in social processes, not just observing or data-gathering. We need to think much more critically about this, to go beyond the acknowledgment of power relations between researcher and researched and actually theorise the research as political intervention. I want us to acknowledge that we *actively* intervene in social and political life when we research the military. For example, in my own research I realised that in asking military personnel questions about gender and sexuality I was reproducing the very discourses and subjectivities I wanted to challenge. This problem has been discussed by others (Stern and Zalewski, 2009) but I'm not sure we've got closer to engaging with it. As a response to this problem, I sought to actively destabilise the gendered terms I was using in my very asking of certain questions and in gently challenging my interviewees on some of their responses.

HG: How do you mean? What kind of things were you asking?

SB: I was asking a lot of questions around sexuality and military identity, and my aim was to understand how gendered difference is produced in military cultures, and simultaneously to demonstrate that those categories of difference are contingent, unstable and ultimately contradictory. Rather than asking questions about straight and gay soldiers, waiting for my interviewees to answer in those terms and simply taking 'my data' home and conducting a clever deconstruction, I tried to enable a deconstruction of gendered difference to take place in the

interviews themselves. For example, on one occasion I was probing a senior commander about why he felt LGBT personnel marching at Pride was inappropriate, despite him being 'very happy' with LGBT personnel serving in the military. He was talking about the need to have a 'military bearing' in public, but when I further questioned him on what that was exactly and why it wasn't possible for LGBT personnel to demonstrate that, he ultimately conceded that it was impossible to answer because it depended where one drew 'the line' (see Bulmer, 2013). He deconstructed his own position. So it was quite an active way of interviewing, which might have its own problems, but I felt that it was more honest and I wanted the people I was engaging with to reflect on their own identities and assumptions. I should also admit that it didn't always work! Some of my interviewees didn't understand what I was getting at or simply responded by repeating their previous statement.

CB: I like this idea of starting to deconstruct what they say while you're still in the interview. We've got an oral history reading group at Hull, and one of the concerns that we always return to is, 'How ethically appropriate is it to deconstruct what research participants say if they didn't know that you might do that?' I know that in the interviews that I did, I didn't ever really get into a space where I was able to challenge people's narratives or ideas. I think this is partially because I had internalised from my institution's ethics committee at the time the idea that every interview, every question, is potentially a source of harm to participants.

HG: I think that in some ways, the experience of my research encounters has changed the ways in which I am drawn to critique, whether inside or outside of the context of the interviews themselves. As you point out in your book *Victoria* (Basham, 2013, 3-4), encounters with military personnel can complicate the somewhat simplistic images that we might hold of what 'the military' and 'military personnel' are; and for me, this has undermined the particular kinds of critique that such imaginings might permit. My encounters with military personnel (in particular with military support workers) have muddied some of the critiques that I thought I wanted to make, and have led to other, more

nuanced, and ultimately I think more productive forms of critique. This has shaped my conversations both within the interviews and elsewhere, and has made the space of the interview itself much more reflexive and open for discussion; a space in which I do feel I can challenge participants, but also in which we can both challenge my own assumptions, too. Your approach sounds great Sarah, and is something I would like to strive for myself.

AH: I think I took a different view of 'challenging' interviewees, and for me it comes back to this idea of having academic mastery over the story we tell with other people's stories, what Alcoff resists in *The Problem of Speaking for Others* (1991). When I began the experience of living in the sergeants' mess and was diligently writing my field diary, as we've said, a lot of social encounters became part of the research. And with that I became really aware of the fact that I was going to be taking 'my data' back home and deconstructing it, as if it was mine to do with as I wished. And then I didn't feel I should be going back to my room and scribbling down an experience I'd had at dinner, or noting down what someone had said, without giving them a chance to respond. So I very soon decided that I would also have to interview some of the people I was living with in the Mess. And that gave rise to an odd interview dynamic. For a start, it required a transition from casual encounters and chit-chat round the dinner table every evening to a quiet, pre-arranged one-to-one encounter that was openly designated as 'an interview'. Often these started off more awkward than my interviews with complete strangers. And secondly, these interviews were reflexive in a way that was very different from my interviews with military wives, because I was asking people about experiences we had shared. Essentially the purpose was to air my own critical interpretation of events and pose it back to research participants, so I'm asking why would you make that racist, homophobic, sexist joke? What is the function of all this 'banter'? Or I'm asking people to tell me what they thought of my presence, if it had changed any of the social dynamics in the mess, and what they thought of this or that awkward situation in which we were both implicated. By doing this I felt at least I was 'outing' my critical position with respect to some really challenging issues, and giving people a chance to

deconstruct the situation themselves, to put their side if you like. But that certainly makes for awkward interviewing and it also opens me up to the accusation of being solipsistic and taking reflexive research too far. It all felt very messy at the time, and listening back to the interviews was also fairly gruelling, having all those raw and messy social relations played back to me.

VB: I also came across comments in my early encounters with military personnel that were highly problematic: racist, sexist, homophobic and the like. I just didn't know how to deal with them. I remember thinking when people were saying these terrible things, 'oh my god, what do I do now' but at the same time 'this is gonna be great for the thesis'. When other white people would try to make me complicit in their racism by telling me how 'different' the culture of their Fijian comrades was or rhetorically asking 'do you know what I mean?', in all honesty, I was both appalled and thrilled. These were difficult moments. What do you say in that situation? The answer may seem obvious – you challenge, you intervene, but these people gave me their time, they willingly opened up to me so what I actually did in those situations was usually to just ask the next question. I think this highlights just how deeply *personal* research is. We've all had experiences like this where the material is sensitive, where you're engaging somebody and there's an interpersonal relationship and a set of presumptions that you are both coming to that encounter with, or which that encounter engenders.

The other thing that I think is important here is that I never saw my interviewees as rational, liberal individuals with individual prejudices and shortcomings. I was trying always to put them in their social context, I was trying to think about what they were saying as discursive, as things that they were articulating in particular conditions of possibility at particular moments. It's then more a question of how you can engage with 'the individual' and challenge those individuals if you don't see them as individuals in the first place. And the same goes for the 'individual' positionality of the researcher: as someone who was also situated in discursive conditions of possibility shaped at least



in some part by the academy and feminism, I found myself compelled to sympathise with these men and women when we were face to face, even though their involvement in war was an affront to me and my sensibilities. This is why what Sarah did was really valuable. Trying to give research participants an opportunity to re-articulate what they're saying so that you can be clearer on it strikes me as a much better enactment of the ethics of critique.

SB: I think the idea around the intervention is to ask questions which then enable people to reflect on themselves, and that's what I suppose makes it political, rather than telling them what to think. It's not that you go in with your own ideas and then you challenge people because you think they're wrong, it's challenging them to self-reflect on the meaning of what they're doing, which then helps you better understand what they're doing and why. But also, I mean I can't get away from it, when people say homophobic things that don't actually make sense in their own terms, I want to question that in a way which renders the limits or assumptions of their own position visible. I don't know if that's quite the same thing or not.

## **FINAL REMARKS**

HG: Thank you all so much for taking part. This has been such a valuable space to think through some of the things which are both troubling and exciting about doing research with/on the military. It has reinforced so many of the key motivations for what I'm trying to do, in particular around the importance of centring insights into the everyday from fieldwork and the encounter more broadly. And it has also raised some really important questions about how we actively engage with the myriad politics implicated in our research, both as we are conducting the fieldwork itself and in the aftermath – the importance of the political work that our research *does*, both in relation to the individuals who participate and the broader institutions implicated. These are in many ways unresolvable questions, but ones which we nonetheless must remain continually alert to.

AH: It strikes me that this discussion about fieldwork encounters, in addition to suggesting really productive ways of thinking about research and about the military in all its guises, is really productive as a feminist 'encounter' in itself.

VB: Yes, there's something here not only about our individual capacity to be reflexive, but about the fact that we've chosen to come together to do it as well and that strikes me as a very feminist thing to do.

AH: Absolutely, hopefully this conversation and some of the double-binds and contradictions it reveals in our encounters with the military, contributes to a kind of feminist research that Carol Smart (2009) has argued should embrace the messiness of human relations. And on a broader scale this is related to the feminist project within IR and Zalewski's (2007, 305 ) idea that perhaps to tidy up all the loose ends and make a coherent 'whole' of 'Feminist IR' as a unified field is beside the point of the feminist project itself.

SB: I totally agree, and I think this process of reflecting together keeps us learning and helps maintain our 'feminist curiosity' (Enloe, 2004) so that we keep asking questions of ourselves and others...

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<sup>i</sup> As with all conversations, ours was one (over Skype) with many 'erms', 'ahs', pauses and interjections. We thought it important to state that these have been edited out in the process of turning speech into text, for which our conversation was transcribed and then circulated and jointly edited. This process struck us as interesting given that the discussion included the question of how we represent our participants' narratives and the issues this highlights about the editing of people's lives, including our own.