

Representations of the British Soldier:

“Mr Lazy’ Pyjamas and “Sobranie Cocktail Cigarettes”.

On the Front Line in Helmand with Lewis and his Men

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Abstract

In this working paper I focus on representations of Lewis, an English army officer portrayed in a televised episode of Channel 4's *Fighting on the Front Line*. His relational framing is examined in depth within the context of the small group of soldiers he commands, as well as an elderly Afghan man with whom he has contact on the ground. Analysis is suggestive of an archetypal representation turning on Lewis' public school background, his English-ness, eccentricity, and his status as Western occupier amongst 'othered' members of the host population. Reflecting on this portrayal, and following the sociologist Tony King, I argue that development of Lewis' character engages increasingly prevalent tropes of domesticisation that have been used to frame military personnel across a range of contexts in the UK. In turn, the political dimensions of this framing are examined against the backdrop of the waning support of the conflicts in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the latter of which might be seen as the 'lost war' that demands a degree of legitimacy. This is provided in somewhat unintended ways through the humanisation of one of the numerous 'our boys' fighting for us on the front line.

Introduction

In this working paper, I provide further evidence for what the military sociologist Tony King has identified in the British context as a growing trend towards the personalisation and domesticisation of the soldierly figure in contemporary times. While he notes that these shifts are exemplified through increasingly intimate commemorative practices of armed forces personnel killed in Afghanistan and Iraq, following discussions engage another medium of soldierly representation – that of the increasingly ubiquitous fly-on-the-wall documentary. Drawing on an illustrative episode of Channel 4's *Fighting on the Front Line*,¹ following discussions focus on the figure of Lewis, a Lieutenant commanding 35 non-commissioned personnel as part of a cavalry division on active operations in Afghanistan. A close analysis of the representational practices framing this individual reveal the importance of a gendered and classed historical trajectory providing for an enduring and endearing figure – one of our (officer) boys – with whom the audience is encouraged to develop a personal affinity. The implications of this framing should be seen in the context of the unpopular war in Afghanistan, where the personalisation and domesticisation of those involved has been argued to divert interest from the wider significance of their occupational practices (King, 2009). In this respect, Lewis' performance can be seen as an exemplar of the current political moment where it may well be that military adventures abroad will become increasingly difficult to sell to a jaded public.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section sketches the broad context and background to discussion. This is followed by a brief examination of the empirical component of the piece – one particular episode of *Fighting on the Front Line*. Played-out through the humanisation of those involved, this documentary reveals the usually hidden

¹ See: <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/fighting-on-the-frontline> accessed 15th December 2011.

aspects of the British army's operations in Afghanistan through the primary foil of Lewis, an English army officer. I then go on to outline the historical conditions of gender and class possibility that make this representational practice of a personalised kind familiar to its audience. Third and finally, the implications of these representational practices are considered and located in the current political moment where questions are raised around the deeper reasons for both the growth of this militarised output, and the personalised means by which it is presented. Alongside a brief summary, the conclusion returns discussion to the relevance of class and Bourdieu's habitus to audience's intuitive ability to engage with this figure with whom they are encouraged to develop a sense of empathy and potential alliance.

Background and Context

In recent times, representations of the British soldier have oscillated between the dominant Our Boy archetype noted for his (and less so, her) loyalty, toughness and determination through, less commonly to the bad apple bully-boy. The latter character of this hero and villain (Woodward *et al*, 2009) binary was invoked in the case of those soldiers responsible for the death of the Iraqi hotel worker Baha Mousa. In this case, news reports of Mousa's death record how he was 'subjected to violent and cowardly abuse and assaults by British servicemen' (Norton-Taylor and Bowcott, 2011:1), with one of the perpetrators being the first to admit to a war crime. In the example of the latter figure, heroes are perhaps more widely evident and have permeated the very fabric of British society to the level of everyday consumer culture as exemplified in the first living recipient of the Victoria Cross in over 30 years, Lance Corporal Johnson Beharry who, in light of heroic acts in Iraq during which he sustained head injuries, has most recently appeared advertising *Wellman* micronutrient

supplements and *Neurozan* micronutrients ... 'to help contribute to normal brain and neurological function'.² More broadly, and seen against the backdrop of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the British military has an unprecedented visibility in both the media and popular culture (Woodward and Winter, 2007: 80). The wellspring of this reinvigorated military presence in everyday life is likely to have a number of sources, just one element of which would include the former Special Air Service Sergeant Andy McNab's multi-million selling novels detailing secretive missions behind enemy lines, from the first Gulf War to the present. Consonant with these trends, BBC 4 now hosts an archive of documentaries from the 1950s through to the mid 1990s covering many aspects of military life, from training to candid discussions with soldiers of killing and its psychological aftermath.³ At the time of writing, BBC 3 had just finished screening a four part fly-on-the-wall documentary *Young Soldiers*, following the progress of a handful of infantry recruits from the commencement of training, through to active service in Afghanistan.⁴ As indicated, Channel 4 has also drawn on Afghanistan with its documentary *Fighting on the Front Line*, focusing on the operational experiences of infantry troops, Apache helicopter pilots and armoured cavalry. Internationally, the film documentaries *Restrepo* recording the experiences of U.S troops in the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan and *Armaddillo* following Danish troops also in Afghanistan, were recently released to much critical acclaim and in the case of the latter, controversy. Running alongside this fly-on-the-wall and real-life output is the long running military-themed proliferation of toys, fashion and a multi-million dollar gaming industry. These militarised artefacts are accompanied by the near daily newspaper and broadcast media

² This advert appeared (amongst others publications), in the London edition of the free newspaper *The Metro* on the 13th December 2011.

³ See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/collections/p00hl622/introduction> accessed 15th December 2011.

⁴ See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b014f74k> accessed 15th December 2011.

reporting of soldiers' deaths in Afghanistan (King, 2010), alongside stories of other, injured veterans who have overcome adversity through the use of prosthetic limbs.⁵ The Wiltshire town of Royal Wootton Bassett functioned until recently as a key sight/site through which soldiers killed in action were repatriated from Royal Air Force Lyneham to the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford and the Coroner's Office. In a more formal sense, 2008 saw the publication of a government document the *National Report into Recognition of the Armed Forces*, where recommendations included: increasing the visibility of the armed services and its men and women, and enhancing contact between civil and military stakeholders that taken together, sought wider support for the armed services. In turn, these and other initiatives have given rise to the presence of uniformed soldiers at national football matches, other significant sporting events and home-coming parades through town centres many of which involve the service-person's charity *Help for Heroes*, for example.

Highlighting just some of those phenomena that actively provide for a diversity of soldierly representations, it is clear that the growing profile of the armed services stands in contemporary times as a socially valid topic of interest with the potential to speak to wider, political concerns in British society. With this in mind, the overall aim in the working paper is to consider one instance of soldierly representation, the analysis of which leads me to argue that despite rapid social change in Britain's ethnic, gender and class orders, framing practices continue to rely on invocations of Britain's past in the form of a nostalgic and classed masculinity. This focus on representation cannot be differentiated from material practice and as such, underscores the ways in which

⁵ For an illustrative example, see: <http://www.ourlocalheroes.org.uk/#/jack-plant/4548366794> accessed 15th December 2011.

‘*imagined* forms [of] masculinities are at once “made up” by creative cultural activity and yet materialize in the social world as structured forms with real effects on men and women’ (Dawson, 1994: 22; *emphasis in original*).

In this sense, masculinity is theorised with cognizance of King’s observation that we should focus on ‘what soldiers distinctively do ... rather than using masculinities as an explanatory framework for performance’ (King, 2006: 510; cited in Woodward and Jenkins, 2009: 260). More broadly then, questions of how far the British military have modernised in the face of its interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan have often overlooked particular, somewhat anachronistic forms of soldierly subjectivity. These can be found thriving on the front line in ways that draw audiences into what some might see as the enigmatic worlds of modern day warriors, whilst simultaneously serving to distance them from the unpopular war in Afghanistan through processes of personalisation and domesticisation, as discussed further below.

The Data: Fighting on the Front Line

Fighting on the Front Line was a three part documentary totalling around 140 minutes screened on Channel 4 on 25th September, 2nd October and the 9th October 2011. As the press release trailing the series notes:

‘Fighting on the Frontline strips away formality with shockingly candid interviews, deploying the no-holds-barred humour of the troops: whether it is the foot soldiers, or “bullet-catchers”, for whom injury and death is an occupational hazard; Chinook helicopter crews flying to the rescue of another casualty of war; the modern-day cavalry soldiers charging through the desert in armoured vehicles, hunting for an

elusive enemy; or the Apache pilots in an attack helicopter, targeting and killing the enemy’⁶

Not only did the series meet a number of its stated aims in terms of first-time access to Apache and Chinook operations, but it has also attracted controversy because of the (apparently unchecked) candour of its armed service participants. For example, commentary in the broadsheet newspapers *The Guardian* and the *Independent on Sunday* reflected concerns around the matter-of-fact, or at moments, celebratory response to insurgent deaths recorded by the Apache-cam, and later shown to troops in the field as part of morale boosting Kill TV events.⁷ In so far as *Fighting on the Front Line* goes then, it might be expected that the personalisation of those in question would be represented in similarly insightful ways, in keeping with the overall aim of stripping away formality characteristic of a broadcaster – Channel 4 - with a reputation of pushing the boundaries. What of the data itself?

Here Comes the Cavalry: Lewis as the Quintessential English Army Officer?

The second episode of *Fighting on the Front Line* entitled War Wagons focused on the aptly named vehicle, the Warthog to which discussion now turns. The Warthog is a somewhat unreliable armoured and tracked vehicle carrying the exposed Commander in the turret, and the bullet-proof glass protected driver lower down at the front. In the episode under scrutiny, the documentary makers recorded troops of the Royal Scots Dragoons who had 6 months to serve in Helmand, Afghanistan. Acting on intelligence, the main task of the Warthogs and

⁶ See: <http://www.channel4.com/info/press/news/c4-gains-unprecedented-access-to-brit-armed-forces-for-new-doc-series> accessed 15th December 2011.

⁷ See: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/british-soldiers-in-afghanistan-shown-war-snuff-movies-2360511.html> accessed 15th December 2011.

their crews was to track down the Taleban, a mission which one soldier described as a ‘giant game of cat and mouse’. The crews embarked on patrols necessitating overnight parking-up in a defensive position that took them some distance from the security of their Forward Operating Base. Numerous incidents were recorded during the episode, including one vehicle’s trailer being struck by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) which blew off its track, leaving the other Warthogs and their crews vulnerable to attack since they were unable to move for threat of further IEDs in the area. This tense period of vulnerability during which a Rocket Propelled Grenade passed within close proximity of one of the crews – an incident that was remotely captured by cameras positioned on the Warthog in question - was only resolved once the IED clearance team arrived by helicopter to make the area safe. The second incident involved two Warthogs becoming immobilised in a fast flowing river, requiring extrication by a Danish military contingent equipped with specialist vehicles, encouraging one of the contingent to say ‘nothing is easy in Afghanistan’. Shortly after, another Warthog crew struck an IED which killed one of the crew members, though the documentary makers were not there to record this particular event. Overall, this action packed episode like the other two dealing with Apache/Chinook operations and the infantry on the front line in Afghanistan, went some way to convey what the war journalist Chris Hedges has called the sensory aspects of conflict in contrast to the more usual mythologized dimensions of war with which many are familiar (Hedges, 2003). Against the backdrop of the graphically portrayed death and injury of soldiers and insurgents, and the associated emotional cycle of fear and relief in these exceptional contexts (Woodward and Winter, 2007: 84), are the characters of the Warthog crews. Here, the documentary was shot and edited in ways that foregrounded two personalities. The first was a middle aged South African non-commissioned officer - veteran of four conflicts - who was described as ‘fearless’ and ‘just this side of sane’ by

Lewis, his commander. This veteran was shown wearing a bandana, talking to camera about his desire to ‘die on the battlefield ... rather than at home in a car crash or something’, and visibly pumped-up after a contact where, from atop the Warthog, he enthusiastically discharged his 50 calibre weapon into an enemy-held compound. His portrayal spoke to that of a ‘soldier’s soldier’, a brave and loyal man it would be good to have alongside – or even out front – when the going got tough.

Of central interest to the current discussion and of a far more concerted and in-depth focus of this particular episode, was the figure of Lewis, the 25 year old Lieutenant in command of the 13 Warthogs and their 35 man crew. A close focus on this individual provided the episode with continuity, with his familiar, endearing presence lending a sense of coherence, predictability and confidence to the brutal realities of situations that turned on the ever present threat of death and mutilation. He was framed as a quietly jovial, somewhat happy-go-lucky chap, crowned with foppish hair and embodying – as his second in command Mo put it – the persona of ‘the ultimate public school boy’.⁸

Mo followed this with the supporting comment that ‘he’s like a little boy sometimes’, and after a brief pause stated with some gentle irony, ‘god he’s going to actually lead me into a battle!’ Mo went on to further justify his framing of Lewis’ as a public school boy by saying ‘he has got that look about him, slightly chubby ... like he has been well looked after’.

Despite this less than militaristic description (that he is ‘chubby’ and presents a privileged and cosseted appearance), Mo has no doubt in Lewis’ tactics which he described as ‘spot on’

⁸ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYC47DYLq2I> accessed 15th December 2011. This video clip from *Monty Python’s ‘The Meaning of Life’*, exemplifies (to its comedy extremes), the trope of officer reserve. Here, a British army officer is shown shaving whilst a battle involving Zulu warriors – regarded as little more than a minor irritation - rages about him.

to the extent that his troops ‘trust him with their lives’. Conveyed with something of a wry smile, Mo concludes by noting that the intensity of their relationship (he is Lewis’ driver in the Warthog and they spend virtually all of their time in one another’s company), is ‘like being married’, thereby invoking the familial metaphor turning on the dense soldierly bonds formed under hardship in times of conflict (Woodward and Winter, 2007: 93), and resonating more broadly with the references to domesticity made in *Young Soldiers* discussed below. Invoking the domestic sphere served to further neutralise the harsh realities of the situation in which the crews lived, worked, got injured and occasionally died. Domesticity is a theme picked up in another scene focused on Lewis. Here, he is shown in a backstage moment, removing items from his rucksack with the Warthogs visible in the background. The first of these is his pair of ‘Mr Lazy’ pyjamas of which he states ‘[I] would wear all day, everyday if I could’. Next, he proudly shows the camera a pack of ‘Sobranie’ cocktail cigarettes. The pyjamas and the cigarettes he states ‘help when in the middle of the desert’. While soldiers typically receive or bring with them personal items reminding them of home, these particular artefacts are infused with a symbolism that chimes with, and strengthens the classed framing of Lewis. Thus, the cocktail cigarettes speak to a privileged class position (they are hardly the preserve of the working man), and later in the episode this point is reinforced when Lewis is offered a ‘stronger cigarette’ by Mo in the immediate wake of the IED attack (noted above). The ‘Mr Lazy’ pyjamas reinforce his construction as child-like, speaking implicitly to his public school upbringing, and its perceived legacy, a dependency that has stymied his maturity.⁹ The class signifiers of this intimate moment between Lewis and the documentary

⁹ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfKjOE9H2zU> accessed 15th December 2011. This video clip portrays Lord Flyte from the British television series *Brideshead Revisited*. He too is conveyed as somewhat child-like on account of his privileged upbringing.

makers is further reinforced through juxtaposition of the scene immediately following which focuses on his subordinates – the non-commissioned working class men who are the Warthog crews. Many are showering and swearing as they do so, stating that it is ‘fucking hot’. Their tattoos are clearly visible, they speak with broad Scottish accents in contrast to Lewis’ refined enunciation, are drinking cans of ‘Irn Bru’,¹⁰ smoking ‘proper’ cigarettes and are stripped to the waist. At one point, the camera is trained on two individuals, one of whom is putting sunscreen on the other, with the recipient jokingly saying ‘that’s how me” wife does it!’, a line that evokes general hilarity from the gathered men. The scene then cuts to Lewis and asks what the ‘tough Scots’ think of him. In response he half turns from the interviewer, and in a self-effacing and modest manner states ‘you better ask them’.

Another scene with Lewis at its centre revolves around an elderly Afghan man, who is filmed dressed in traditional garb and speaking with a translator about safety concerns linked to the presence of British troops in close proximity to his village. Unlike previous scenes, Lewis is in the background, perched on the bonnet of his Warthog. The Afghan man, both toothless and bearded, is being questioned about a suspect IED indicated by stones on the ground, and in response talks quickly with wild gesticulations. Looking on, and in a somewhat condescending, rhetorical manner, Lewis poses the question of the elderly Afghan, ‘is he a bit mad?’ His words are ambiguous since they invite two possible readings. First, that the man is in some way mentally deficient, or second and less prosaically, simply frustrated at being questioned. The local man’s subsequent comments conveyed via the translator elicit the following, flippantly delivered comment from Lewis, ‘no, we don’t intend to kill him!’ At

¹⁰ Irn Bru is a traditional, sweetened and carbonated drink consumed by Scots. Whilst its symbolic resonance is perhaps less rigidly fixed to the working classes, its consumption in the context noted above cemented the dimensions of both class and national identity in opposition to the Englishness of Lewis.

this, Lewis and his men laugh once again. Lewis then says of the Afghan man ‘he is about the same age as Noah ... he looks like Noah!’ This elicits yet more laughter. The scene is brought to a close when Lewis asks the translator in a somewhat patronising tone to say ‘thank you’ to the man, followed by the words ‘see you later’. Finally, tired of the Afghan’s protestations, Lewis’ tone here is dismissive. The elder is seen as an irritation, with the phrase ‘see you later’ ringing hollow since the men are unlikely to meet again. Lewis then turns to his men and says ‘he’s a nutter ... he’s like something from the biblical times isn’t he?’ The scene is complete, and the Afghan is successfully ‘othered’ through presenting him as an irrelevant, biblical figure of the past, a framing that functions as a particular narrative of military orientalism (Porter, 2009).

A further layer of Lewis’ character exploited by the documentary makers, and running throughout the episode, concerns his love of wild birds. Towards the opening of War Wagons the documentary makers present stunning, sun kissed vistas of Afghanistan’s lakes and desert. In one, the sun is setting and Lewis is framed in the foreground with the light silhouetting his features. Here, he is presented as understated, thoughtful and reflective and states subsequently that he is ‘looking for birds as much as he is looking for the Taleban’. Lewis’ love of wild birds is widely known by his peers and during a formal briefing about insurgent activity, mention of a ‘lone pelican’ is made. At this point, Lewis becomes animated and says ‘really?’ With obvious delight, he then requests the precise reference of the bird’s location on the map, with this scene segwaying into the next which frames him in contemplative pose looking through binoculars from the turret of his Warthog. As the episode is brought to a close, and within the context of a searching discussion with one of the documentary makers about the death of his soldier in the IED incident, he is asked what his ‘biggest disappointment is so far’. He pauses for a moment and in the self-effacing manner

that has proven to be a ubiquitous feature of his presentation of self throughout, states wistfully, ‘not finding the pelican ... he’s out there fishing somewhere.’

Discussion: Subjectivity, Masculinity and Class Trajectories

Lewis’ representation does not occur in either an historical or cultural vacuum. Its intelligibility resides in surprisingly tenacious narratives circulating in wider British society that make possible the readings produced above. As Dawson (1994: 23) puts it:

‘The story that is actually told is always the one preferred amongst other possible versions, and involves a striving, not only for a formally satisfying narrative or a coherent version of events, but also for a version of the self that can be lived with in relative psychic comfort ... that is, subjective composure’

Of course, the readings of Lewis’ representation can be contested, but their resonance with contemporary classed narratives of army officer presentation turning on the subtleties of reserve and understatement. For example, the portrayal of British army Major Carl ‘Chuckles’ Boswell in *Young Soldiers*, underscore this particular trope of military masculine subjectivity informed by the continued salience of class signifiers. To illustrate: the Major has a well-spoken wife called ‘Polly’, is shown walking his black Labrador dog in a backstage moment in ways that invoke narratives of the landed gentry and country sports, and is also portrayed in an endearing manner conveyed through modesty, thoughtfulness and self deprecation (Paris, 2000). At another point in the episode of *Young Soldiers* focusing on Boswell and his men, a U.S soldier is invited to give a briefing to soldiers newly arrived in the Afghan theatre. In contrast to the gathered British troops and especially Boswell, somewhat stereotypically, the American is loud, gregarious and over-stated. He is larger than

life and informs the gathered crowd in a booming voice that ‘winning hearts and minds is not about shooting people!’ While the juxtaposition of British with U.S troops is part of a wider project currently underway (Higate, 2012), attention now turns to a consideration of those historical influences which provide for the familiar personalised and domesticised presentations of Lewis.

Continuities: Modest Men and the Blond Bedouin

Limited space prohibits an extensive analysis of Lewis’ subjectivity sketched above, though the historical record contains some intriguing and potentially revealing clues to continuity that help to explain the powerful reproduction of ‘conceptions of gender and nation as unchanging essence’ (Dawson, 1994: 11). For example, in Jill Plain’s (2006) insightful work on the successful British actor, John Mills, we note that this so-called ‘Everyman’ is also replete with qualities of sincerity, emotional restraint, determination, reserve, self-deprecation, steadiness and modesty. At the very heart of Lewis’ representation, these character traits are said to be tied to an imperial identity productive of ‘a Britishness instantly recognisable around the world’ (Plain, 2006: 3). Similarly, Mills’ presentation of self speaks to a sense of stability and permanence where British decency and honour was frequently offset with imagined ‘American’ masculine traits embodied in James Cagney’s ‘tough and bustling’ framing (Plain, 2006: 53). The foil of the archetypal American masculinity with which British presentations are brought into sharp relief through their relational constitution, are highlighted in the following scene from the 1945 John Mills film, *The Way to the Stars*:

‘In terms of both visual impact and dialogue, national difference is embodied ... [the American actor] ... is taller. He physically dominates the room and takes up a

confident territorial pose ... [the American] talks as much with his hands as with his voice ... [the American] is scarcely aware of Mills' (Plain, 2006: 79).

There is something of the anti-hero about Lewis (and Mills) turning in respect of the Lieutenant, on the self-conscious downplaying of his well-respected soldierly skills that disavow bravado, and are framed in ways that also resonate with temperate Second World War masculinities (Rose, 2004: 184). These traits can be traced further into history and emerged in the face of the devastating legacy of the Great War that persisted for many decades, where anti-heroes - often couched in terms of understatement - were constructed in ways that intensified during the Second World War 'in opposition to a hyper masculine Nazi-like image' that arose in later years (Rose, 2004: 177). As the portrait of Lewis suggests, representations dominating during the Second World War 'have had a long life in historical memory ever since' (Rose, 2004: 178), and ultimately have their heritage in the 'Victorian disassociation of gender' between emotionally demonstrable women and their 'stern' men (Tosh cited in Rose, 2004: 179). Further strands to British masculinity include decency, honour, chivalry and the idea of fair play. The point at which Lewis declares to his subordinates that the elderly Afghan man is 'not to be killed' is derived from these sentiments, and made possible in this particular power relationship as one element of 'a manly code of behaviour taught to boys at public school' (Paris, 2000; Rose, 2004: 182). Dovetailing with British tropes that speak to a privileged masculinity are those that 'abhor boastfulness' and practice 'self-effacement', exemplified in Mills' highly acclaimed portrayal of Scott of the Antarctic (Plain, 2006: 113). Lewis's character then, is presented as that of a (minor) imperial hero', imbued with qualities that 'came naturally to the right sort of Englishman' (Plain, 2006: 115). In microcosm, and amongst a number of other recognisable attributes, Lewis is represented as the Everyman English army officer. This form is familiar to his working class

Scottish subordinates, the documentary makers and their audience, all of whom respond to continuities embedded in cultural history fostered throughout the earliest years of socialization (Dawson, 1994). A further dimension to this historical trajectory is to record Lewis' subjectivity as both converging and diverging with 'imaginings' of Lawrence of Arabia, a key figure of the past with a strong presence in the present and a useful foil in this context (Dawson, 1994).

Like Lawrence, Lewis is portrayed as somewhat unmilitary, underscored in his obvious glee at wearing Mr Lazy pyjamas and sporting foppish hair rather than a regulation military crew cut. While seemingly more comfortable than Lawrence with the strictures of military life, both practice a degree of role distance grounded in self-confidence of their military abilities. Like Lawrence, Lewis is something of a reluctant hero, and is contemplative as much as he is a man of action (Dawson, 1994: 193). As a consequence of the operational specificities of the Warthog role, there is also a sense – again like Lawrence – that Lewis is able to 'fashion the world according to his own desires, far away from the cramped, regimented and soulless hierarchies, out in the limitless desert' (Dawson, 1994: 176). The degree of autonomy and self sufficiency practiced on patrols lasting many days speaks to this frontier like character, moving in uncharted territories and surviving on one's wits through careful interpretation of intelligence reports, and a mix of both tempered and militarily decisive action when required. Yet, adept as he is at working in extremes of heat and stress in the desert, the parallels with Lawrence end there. This rupture in identity is brought into sharp focus in the scene involving the Afghan elder that may indeed be said to strip away formality and reveal the authentic persona. Unlike what is known of Lawrence's relationship with his (Arab) men, Lewis' encounter speaks to (albeit justifiable) exasperation derived from the experiences of fighting a chameleon-like enemy, able to wield 'an AK47 one minute, and a plough the next', as one

frustrated infantryman put it. Though by no means as provocative as the use of Kill TV to motivate the troops (as indicated), the scene with Lewis and the Afghan man was nevertheless remarkable in that it appeared wholly discordant with the usual narratives of winning hearts and minds, where more typically soldiers throw sweets to children, hug babies, and show nothing but respect for their hosts – especially the elders. This is not a Lawrence imbued with cultural empathy and a desire to foster deeper understandings of his hosts, but rather, one of antagonism where the locals can never be partners in a common struggle, as Lewis might see it and in the case of Lawrence, the mainstream view of his superiors in respect of the Arab Revolt. Intriguingly enough, Lewis’ desire to engage with the exotic and to get to know something of a foreign culture gets (re)presented in the desire to learn more about the wild birds of Afghanistan where his enthusiasm is tangible. Here, Lewis seeks knowledge of different species, meticulously recording them in a notebook which can be seen as a pacific artefact incongruously juxtaposed with the War Wagon of the Warthog. He wishes to know ‘where the birds’ are and ‘what they are doing ... I wonder if the pelican is fishing right now?’ he asks quizzically. This predilection towards nature, where wild birds are also presented as metaphors for the (altogether more cunning) Taleban, are played-out against the backdrop of the setting sun and the seductive aura of the desert wilderness – prime Lawrence cues. In this way, it is the bird population of Afghanistan that provides the foil for Lewis’ quintessential English eccentricity, fused with his imperial hero status, and crystallised in his Lawrence moments of both closeness and distance to the land and its people (or wild birds) (Dawson, 1994: 185).

The Politics of Representation: Afghanistan as the Lost War

How far the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan will provide for novel portrayals of British military masculinity is yet to be seen. Yet, it is possible to make some provisional observations around emerging representations that position Lewis in his wider political context in ways that have been obfuscated by the intimate and personalised portrayal considered above. Despite the handful of (serving) senior military officers and politicians that speak confidently of the positive legacies of the war in Afghanistan, most would agree that the allied occupation has been a disaster. Realisation that a military solution has been unable to deliver security and its corollary, the successful conditions for development, has profound political implications that percolate down to the level of everyday representation.

Up Close and Personal

In noting the wider context of political legitimacy, Anthony King's (2010) work on commemoration practices of British soldiers killed in Afghanistan can be broadened and deepened through its application to the current raft of real life documentaries indicated earlier. King's starting point is that British operations in Helmand, Afghanistan have become of increased fascination (and visibility) to the public, and that the ways in which soldiers killed therein are memorialised 'illustrate wider processes of transformation in British culture' (King, 2010: 5). In contrast to the universal and anonymised casualty announcements of soldier's deaths made decades previously during the Great War, the Second World War and the conflict in Korea for example, current day announcements have become elaborate cultural artefacts (King, 2010: 8), an observation that chimes with the contrasts between older documentaries about the British military in relation to today's *Fighting on the Front Line*. While the medium of documentaries have always tended to identify particular characters in

ways that provide them with some personal depth and an engaging plot-line necessary for viewer connection, these processes have intensified. This cult of the personality (King, 2010: 14-19) finds its clearest expression in the domestication of soldiers, as will be recalled in the cases of both Major Boswell and Lewis, whose framing depended on a carefully managed dissolution of the professional and personal spheres. As King (2010: 19) argues:

‘It is not just that the domestic relations of ... soldiers are now more important to the public and that soldiers have been partly extracted from the once total military institution ... civilians are able [now] to re-connect to them most effectively through the shared experience of domesticity.’

In a broader sense, and striking a chord with questions of legitimacy raised above, are the political implications of this process where individualization and personalisation of the soldier(s) in question divert attention from the state and its responsibility for sending troops to war, and for some, to their death (King, 2010: 20). Much like the functioning of narratives that render it legitimate to support Our Boys and Our Girls whilst condemning the wider (political) project of which they are key vectors on the ground, ‘to deny the sacrifice of British soldiers is to denigrate the personal memory of the soldier [as Lewis is framed as a member of] a national community of personalities (King, 2010: 21-22). Similarly, in their analysis of media photographs of British servicemen, Woodward *et al* (2009: 221) argue:

‘What is notable about these contemporary figures are the ways in which the heroic position ascribed to the soldier is rearticulated in the present time to reflect current anxieties about the use of violence, particularly its legitimacy or otherwise.’

These anxieties inform the representation of Lewis, that while nested within familiar narratives of imperial, class and masculine continuity (Paris, 2000), do nonetheless give rise

to questions around his role and presence in an unwinnable war. It is important however to caution against a simplistic conspiratorial or perhaps instrumental understanding of the social processes that give rise – ultimately - to Lewis’ personalisation. Rather, seen in light of the armed forces involvement in conflict in the post-Cold war period, there has perhaps been a lingering sense that the wider public have failed to understand that armed services personnel are far from the two dimensional, stereotyped, squaddie that some might associate with this role. In this regard, as indicated in respect of the *Recognition of the Armed Services* document noted above, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has clearly been involved in facilitating greater degrees of access for journalists and others aiming to illuminate the realities of life in the military. Here, there appears to be a convergence of MoD interests with the ways in which documentary makers and others engage a particular form of personalised narrative as the prime way in which to elicit audience interest. In the case of *Fighting on the Front Line*, this may have let slip the mask in ways that the MoD has failed to predict, that in turn they have been forced to defend.

Concluding Comments: Professionalism and Class

In explicating the connections between a public school education and the British army officer corps, Keith Macdonald has argued for the tenacity of privilege in reproducing this military elite. He states that:

‘The property assets of the upper middle class allow their offspring to acquire at public school the cultural assets that will enable them to succeed in a military career’ (Macdonald, 2004: 106).

It is worth reproducing elements of Bourdieu's conception of habitus here (cited in Macdonald, 2004: 110), since it illuminates those imperceptible aspects of Lewis familiar to both documentary maker and audience alike. In this way 'it is the imponderables of manners and deportment, the particular kinds of jokes ... the characteristic ways of moving, speaking, laughing, and interacting with others' (Bourdieu, 1996: 83, cited in Macdonald, 2004: 110). In turn, these imponderables have powerful material and symbolic effects, one of which is the capacity to embody Lewis with a distinct army officer habitus that many in the audience might find compelling since they intuitively recognise that this officer has a 'feel for the game'. In complementing Macdonald's analysis, King (2009: 124) notes that while social background is important in the lives of army officers, so too is their professional expertise. He goes on to argue that

'the future of the British officer corps will not be determined by a putative habitus ... [but rather its future] will be determined by the collective expertise which they develop' (King, 2009:141).

This may be true in respect of the army's operational effectiveness where demands for savings and efficiency have reached their zenith in recent years. Yet, a habitus infused with nostalgia, and speaking to continuity and permanence is also at one and the same time, a point of reference of considerable importance to audiences that seek certainty in *their* personalities of war.

Despite rapid social change across many aspects of British society, I have in this chapter signalled historical continuity in representational practice of the archetypal, public school educated, English army officer in the figure of Lewis. Drawing on insightful sociological commentary on the British military, it has been argued that an increased emphasis on the

intimate, the personal and the domestic has permeated – amongst others – the genre of the soldier-focused documentary. Severing individuals from the political character of their profession through a minor celebritisation of their experiences, serves in turn to leave largely undisturbed what many see as the futility of the war in Afghanistan.

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