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Military Recruitment, Work & Culture in the South Wales Valleys: A Local Geography of Contemporary British Militarism

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Abstract

This article explores how social and cultural life in the south Wales valleys, an area of economic deprivation within Britain, has been shaped by the British military and militarism, in ways that are both specific to the area and shared with other regions throughout the country. In particular, it argues that the convergence of several factors – including the processes of Welsh devolution and Welsh nationalism, the rise of the US-led war on global terror, the efforts of the British government to reshape civilian-military relations in the country, as well as the continuing economic struggles of the south Wales valleys themselves – has led to a resurgence of military presence and militarism in the region over the past decade. The article focuses on the ethical dilemmas of military recruitment in areas of economic deprivation. It also contributes to the literature on the everyday geographies of militarisation and militarism, a literature that argues that we can only understand how militarism is structured and rooted in the broader fabric of national society and economy if we examine closely how it is differentially embedded within and shaped by a myriad of social relationships and institutions at the local and regional level.

Keywords

Acknowledgement

Introduction

Two black horses pulled a glass carriage, descending slowly through the Garw valley of south Wales, carrying the body of Private Craig Barber, age 20, of the 2nd Batallion The Royal Welsh. Barber, who had grown up in the Garw and neighbouring Ogmore valleys, had been killed two and a half weeks earlier, while driving an armoured vehicle through the city streets of Basra, Iraq. As the horse-drawn carriage and funeral procession passed through the villages of Blaengarw and Pontycymer, the streets were lined with mourners. Shops were closed, and Welsh flags hung out of windows, over doorways and in gardens. The procession paused briefly outside the homes of Barber's grandmother and mother, before continuing to the Coychurch Crematorium in Bridgend for a military funeral. There, soldiers from Barber's regiment carried his coffin inside, while the song, 'Hero' by Enrique Iglesias, was played (Dimbleby 2011; MoD 2007; *Western Mail* 2007; Wright 2007). Barber's family would later set up the Craig Barber Memorial Trust, raising money in his memory 'to support both individual soldiers and children's groups within the communities in the Ogmore and the Garw Valley' (CBMT 2011). In Cardiff, the Military Preparation College – a Welsh government funded military training programme where Barber had gone when he was sixteen years old, one year before he joined the army – created the Craig Barber Trophy, that it now awards every year to its most improved student.

Discussions of social and economic conditions in the south Wales valleys typically focus on the legacies of the coal and steel industries that used to dominate life throughout the region, but which have today, after a prolonged decline, virtually disappeared. To a lesser extent, discussions have also focused on new industries that boosters hoped would replace coal and steel in the area: light manufacturing, tourism, forestry or a vaguely defined knowledge economy. But one line of work that has retained a presence in south Wales valleys communities for generations has been left largely unaddressed in academic and public debate: that is the work that young men and women from the area perform for the British armed forces. The relative silence surrounding this military work is not unique to the Welsh valleys, but is similar to other regions across Britain. For, as Woodward (2004: 3) observes in her work on the geography of militarism in the UK, 'military geographies are everywhere; every corner of every place … is touched, shaped, viewed and represented in some way by military forces and military activities.' However, as Woodward (2005: 719) also notes, these military geographies 'are often subtle, hidden, concealed or unidentified,' and are frequently left invisible in political discourse and under-researched in contemporary social science.

Britain is a country whose armed forces have been involved in overseas conflicts almost continuously since 1945 (Curtis 2003). It has played a lead role in two of the largest military

occupations of the twenty-first century, in Iraq and Afghanistan. As of 2010, Britain had the world's third largest military budget (SIPRI 2011); and it has long been one of the world's largest arms producers and exporters (Stavrianakis 2010). Given such a massive and extended military buildup, we should not expect to be able to talk about social and economic conditions in the south Wales valleys, or any other region in Britain, without paying attention to how these have been shaped by the country's military institutions, spending, operations and culture. As Lutz (2001: 3) writes of the United States, in such a context, there is 'an important sense' in which 'we all inhabit an army camp.' At the same time, as Bernazzoli and Flint (2009: 394, 404) argue, the cultural, political and economic processes of militarization and militarism are themselves shaped by the 'contingency of place' and 'unfold differently in different localities due to the ways in which these processes are mediated by unique local contexts.' We cannot understand how militarism – that is, the normalisation of war and preparation for war, prioritization of the needs and interests of military institutions, and extension of military culture and influence into everyday public and private life (Bernazzoli and Flint 2009; Johnson 2004; Mann 1987; Wall 2009; Woodward 2004, 2005) – is structured and rooted in the broader fabric of British society and economy, unless we examine how this plays out in the 'myriad' of 'local institutions' and 'social relations' that are embedded within particlar places around the country (Bernazzoli and Flint 2010: 165).

In this article, we explore how social and economic life in the south Wales valleys is shaped by the British military and militarism, in ways that are both particular to the area and shared with other regions throughout the UK. While communities in the south Wales valleys have a long tradition of military work, they have seen a resurgence over the past decade of military presence and militarism that has been driven by the convergence of several factors: the rise of the US-led global war on terror; the attempts by the British government to re-shape civil and military relations, in response to public opposition to British participation in the US-led war on terror; the process of Welsh devolution and the promotion of Welsh economic development agendas and Welsh nationalism across Wales; and the continuing economic struggles of the south Wales valleys. The Welsh valleys are often represented as an insular region that has been cut off from and left behind by the rest of the national and global economy. But such representations are inaccurate. As in the story of Private Barber, lives and communities in the valleys are intimately linked, through military work especially, to many other, far-flung corners of the globe. Ironically, it is precisely their economic isolation within Britain that fosters the valleys' global military connectivity. For it has become unremarkable, and an article of common sense in Britain today, that there is and should be an organic link between areas of economic deprivation in the country and participation in the military force that Britain continues to project all over the world.

The Research Study

The starting point for this article were two linked studies of child and family well-being, and youth transitions in the south Wales valleys region, that we were involved with as university fieldworkers at the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) from 2009 to 2011. Neither of these studies focused on military issues directly. However, over the course of fieldwork in both studies, it became clear that military work and recruitment were playing an important role in the lives of many young people, families and communities in the region. It was also clear this was an issue that had been overlooked in previous studies of the south Wales valleys. We thus launched a follow-up study that focused specifically on the role of military recruitment, work and culture in the south Wales valleys. For this study, we drew on interview and ethnographic data that had been collected in the two original studies with parents, teachers and community workers, children and young people living in one south Wales valleys community: this amounted to over one hundred semi-structured interviews, and more than a year's worth of ethnographic fieldnotes based on observations of school, family and community meetings and interactions. We also conducted a further twenty interviews with military recruiters, military educators, school teachers, community and youth workers, and both youth and adults from across the valleys who were either planning to enlist in the military, or had served in the military and subsequently returned to the region; we observed military recruitment and commemoration events in the region over a six-month period; and we collected media, government, military and academic documents and reports on the topic of military recruitment, work and culture in the south Wales valleys area.

The South Wales Valleys as Recruiting Grounds for the British Army

For many young people who grow up in the south Wales valleys, joining the armed forces has long been seen as one of three principal routes available to them – along with getting married or getting an education – for 'getting out' of the valleys and trying to make a better life for themselves. 'There's not a great deal here in the valleys to keep them here,' says a former soldier from the region, who spent a lifetime travelling the world with the British Army, before returning to spend his retirement years in the same valley in which he was born. In previous eras, joining the army had been seen by some young men from the valleys as a preferable alternative to going 'down the pit' and working in the coal mines that dominated the local economy (Harnden 2011: 6). More recently, military service is looked to by young men and, increasingly, women as a way to avoid unemployment or escape the drudgery and meagre reward of work in dead-end jobs in the local service sector. For the south Wales valleys today have some of the highest unemployment and economic inactivity rates and lowest income levels anywhere in Britain (Beatty and Fothergill 2011). 'A lot of [the young

people] we work with,' says a community worker on one of the valleys's poorest housing estates, 'if they hadn't gone into the Army, God knows what they would have been doing now.' 'It shouldn't have to be like that,' she adds, 'there should be a choice, because you want to go and fight for your country, not just to get out of this place, because there are no jobs.'

As a consequence of their prolonged economic stagnation, the south Wales valleys have long been recognised as being one of the primary recruiting grounds in Britain for the armed forces – and, in particular, the army. Wales, as a whole, consistently has higher than average levels of army recruitment in comparison to its proportion of the British population (personal interview, head of British army recruiting in Wales, January 2011). While the British Army does not publicise recruitment statistics for the Welsh valleys specifically, army recruiters say that the valleys are one of their major recruiting sites in Wales; and some claim the valleys are the source for a majority of those serving in the Welsh regiments (in particular, the Royal Welsh and Welsh Guards):

> In the valleys, there's a lot of the Welsh regiments and a lot of ex-Welsh regiments, so you know, there's a lot of buddies going on, and the people know each other…. If you're not in the Royal Welsh, you've most probably got a brother, sister, dog, cat, they've been in the Royal Welsh or the Welsh Guards…. It's quite an affiliation. And it is called the Taffia, because when they go to different regiments, you know you are the same thing…Up in the valleys, [the army has] got to be a major employer, but other than that, … I just think it's part and parcel of life. It's like the steelworks [used to be], and it employs big [numbers of] people.

Army recruiters working in the valleys note a range of motivations among those young people who decide to enlist: some want to join the army because they have family members or friends who have enlisted; some are looking for action and adventure; some want 'to prove themselves' and 'join the fittest' workers in British society; and some want to enlist because they say they've always loved the army and knew it is what they wanted to do. A few recruiters claim that young people from the valleys are particularly suited for military work: as one recruiter says, 'they're fit, they're strong, they're wiry and … they do the job'; or, as another recruiter argues, valleys youth 'make really good soldiers, because where they come from, it's a bare knuckle existence, they are very hardy from this region.' What every army recruiter working in the area recognises, however, is that the primary connection between the south Wales valleys and military work is the impoverished state of local economic conditions. 'It's easier [to recruit] here because of the high unemployment,' says

one recruiter bluntly: 'A lot of parents that come in, you know, and say, 'Yeah, he's going in the army,' and a lot of them say to us, 'There's just no work here for him.''

In 2006, a Welsh Assembly Member from the Rhondda Valley, Leanne Wood, complained that the British Army was targeting schools in more deprived neighbourhoods in Wales in its recruitment efforts, and called for a ban on all recruitment in schools (*BBC News* 2006). Local recruiters remain bitter about the incident – and about what they call 'leftwing teachers' who raise questions about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq when they are talking with pupils in schools. 'What war?,' says one recruiter, 'there's no war there. It is a peacekeeping operation…. Don't go worrying families here with talk of war. It's not right and it is not accurate.' Partly as a consequence of Woods's and other official and unofficial complaints, recruiters now maintain the façade that the outreach work they do in schools is entirely about communication, information and education, and has nothing to do with their recruitment agenda (Gee 2007: Gee and Goodman 2010). In many ways, however, complaints by Woods and others simplify and even misrepresent the way in which military recruitment in regions like the south Wales valleys works. For recruitment in the valleys isn't driven just by the intrusion of outside recruiters. Rather, it has become embedded as part of the everyday fabric of local life. Some schools in the area regularly call in recruiters to do drills and exercises with their pupils, and have come to see the army as a solution for pupils 'who can't do any better for themselves.' Indeed, recruiters complain about the attitudes of some schools and teachers, who they say view the army as the 'Colouring In Club' or 'Last Chance Squad.' Recruiters worry, too, that their activities in valleys schools that have always been good sources of army recruits may be doing little more than 'bombing the rubble,' as youth from these schools are likely to enlist whether recruiters visit or not. Teachers, community and youth workers, parents and others who work with young people in the valleys, though they may have misgivings about the risks of military work, the loss involved in careers that take youth far away from their homes and families, and the injustice of an economic situation in which military work is taken up less out of choice than lack of choice, nevertheless often call or welcome in recruiters, and support or encourage young people who are considering joining the army. After all, some teachers and community and youth workers know the local army recruiters personally, as they come from the same communities and grew up together; and some are ex-military themselves, and were able to use their time in the armed forces to gain valuable skills and experience, and move into rewarding and decently paid occupations.

Ironically, the same economic deprivation that has created such strong links between the south Wales valleys and military work, can also serve to undermine the ability of some valleys youth to successfully enlist in the army. Recruiters repeatedly express their concern

over local misunderstandings of what enlisting actually requires, and the enduring myth that 'anybody can get into the army.' As many as 80% of applicants who come into a local army recruiting office wanting to join the army either are ruled ineligible or drop out of the recruiting process along the way. 'We are full' at the moment, says one recruiter, 'we're doing really well, so we can pick and choose' who we want in the army. Many youth from the valleys struggle to meet basic eligibility requirements, having low academic achievement levels, poor health and fitness, histories of drug use or criminal records – all of which correlate with growing up in high poverty and low income neighbourhoods (Gough, Eisenschitz and McCulloch 2005; Raffo et al. 2011; Smith, Dorling and Shaw 2001). 'Many girls around here, especially, are very unfit,' says one recruiter, 'they can't run the mile and a half, they are way over time.' If applicants have been prescribed medication for asthma or depression or other illnesses, they have to wait for a period of time before they are eligible to apply to enlist, regardless of whether or not they still suffer from these conditions. While waiting, it is not uncommon for applicants to become ineligible for military service for other reasons: they may get pregnant, for example, they may get into trouble with the law, or lose their physical fitness.

Sarah Lloyd Jones (2005), in her study of school-to-work transitions of youth from low income homes in the south Wales valleys, found that some youth ended up getting stuck when their military aspirations fell through. As one twenty-four old man she worked with reflected:

> Oh yea. I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to join the army, … so I didn't think of anything else… But, like, our mam didn't want me to go into the army and you've got to be 18 before you can sign up on your own accord, so I waited till then … But it didn't work out … I did go, I done all the tests … I failed the medical, 'cos I've got a bone out of place in my big toe, in my foot. They reckoned that I wouldn't be able to do all the marching, so I was gutted about that – devastated… Yea, have started to go downhill since then. 'Cos I really did want to go into the army, that was the one thing I did want to do. (Jones 2005: 208)

We came across similar stories in our fieldwork. One young man, working in a minimum wage retail job spoke of how all he'd ever wanted to do was join the air force or army. He joined the local air force cadets at a young age, but then failed both the air force and army selection tests, on fitness grounds, and was left stuck, unsure of what to do with his life – while watching some of his former cadet friends go on with their military careers. One of

these friends just got a call up to go over to the United States to train with the Special Forces. 'You know,' he says, 'if I had worked a bit harder that could have been me.'

Military Culture in the Valleys

In the south Wales valleys town of Aberdare, there is a picture on the wall behind the entrance desk of the town's main youth club of a boy in a tank. The boy, Bradley John Stephens, was a local child who was diagnosed with a brain tumor early in his life and died at the age of nine. Before he died, one of Bradley's wishes was to ride in a tank. A local family friend had served with the Royal Artillery, and was able to call his friends in the army and arrange for Bradley to be flown by helicopter to an army training range, where he was able to go for a tank ride. 'The regiment adopted him,' explains a local youth worker, 'they actually swore him in, and he became the youngest sergeant in the British Army.' On Bradley's last birthday, his family threw him a party at their home in Aberdare:

> The guys in the Royal Artillery heard about it, so they came up and they decked his garden out like it was an assault course, all nets and everything, and they took the kids and they had [an army truck] … and was taking them around Aberdare in the truck which was all dolled up, … [Bradley] thought it was brilliant. And when he got buried, he was buried in a … coffin carried by the Royal Artillery, and he had a full military funeral. (personal interview, May 2010)

Military life, military culture, military identity are never far away in the valleys. Partly, this is because, as a region of high military recruitment, virtually everyone knows someone who is or was in the military. At the Aberdare youth club, one youth worker had grown up in a military family that had lived all over the world, and himself had served in the Territorial Army and been an army cadet instructor; another youth worker had been a combat medic for seven years, seeing tours of duty in the first Gulf War and Northern Ireland. It is not uncommon, therefore, to hear youth workers and youth at the club talk about the army, army life and thoughts of army enlistment. For those who do enlist, many subsequently return to the valleys after their periods of service have ended, so that, on a daily basis, one meets in the valleys ex-servicemen and women who now work as police, firefighters, housing officials, teachers, counsellors, driving instructors, retail clerks, security guards and so on. Older veterans often gather together at the Comrades Associations of the Welsh Guards and Royal Welsh that exist in most valley towns. Younger veterans are more likely to stay connected with their military family through Facebook, or at local army rugby matches and other army charity events.

Military culture, life and identity are made visible in the south Wales valleys today through other sources as well. There are the outreach activities run by army recruiters, the after-school programmes run by the army and air force cadets, and the local embrace of a pedagogical model, increasingly popular throughout Britain, that sees the military as a vehicle for the education and discipline of 'hard-to-reach' children and youth living in deprived communities. In 2007, Treorchy Comprehensive School in the Rhondda valley became the first state school in Wales to open a Combined Cadet Force, a programme it runs in partnership with the Ministry of Defence and Welsh Guards, and that engages pupils in military drills, adventure activities and weapons training. Before that, the county borough of Rhondda Cynon Taff partnered with Skill Force, an educational charity launched by the Ministry of Defence in 2000, that hires mainly ex-services personnel to work for two half-days every week with young people who are disengaged from school. As a local Skill Force team leader in the Rhondda valley explains, Skill Force instructors benefit from:

> the kudos of being in the army, having been around. The kids feed off your experiences, where have you been, have you killed anybody? They say, the army boys are coming! Even the teachers – Here they come, they'll sort them out! (Greatbatch et al. 2007: 42)

Such claims are echoed by a head teacher from Porth County Community School: 'The fact that they are ex-military means that the pupils have a different relationship to adults…. Skill Force instructors have different life experiences that teachers have not. They draw upon this when teaching' (Greatbatch et al. 2007: 42). Skill Force is explicitly an educational and not a recruiting programme. But, as one former Skill Force instructor explains, 'kids wanted to ask questions all the time about the military and … we weren't allowed to sell it as an option…. So what we started doing then was … [to say] to the school, 'We've actually got contacts with army recruiters, would you like us to bring them in?'' (personal interview, March 2011).

With the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan (and before that, Iraq), the military receives regular coverage in south Wales valleys media. The *South Wales Echo*, for example, ran a series of articles in early 2010 on soldiers from Merthyr Tydfil who had just returned home from a tour of duty in Afghanistan. 'There were so many Welsh flags out there and so many of us from Merthyr, which definitely helped some of the younger ones adjust when they first got out,' said one soldier interviewed by the paper: 'There's nothing quite like a bit of Merthyr banter, it's just unique and the atmosphere and morale between us all was second to none' (Malone 2010a: 8). Some articles presented profiles of individual soldiers from the area: Simeon Howells, age 25, from Merthyr, who had 'fallen in with the wrong crowd in his youth'

and was 'doing jobs I didn't particularly enjoy,' but had then been 'saved' by the army, and now was returning from Afghanistan a 'war hero' (Malone 2010c: 10); or David Braithwaite, age 26, from the Gurnos estate, who had joined the army 'after becoming bored of life in the Valleys,' but now does what is 'arguably the most dangerous of all jobs in the fight against the Taliban,' disabling improvised explosive devices (IEDs) (Malone 2010b: 21). Many of these stories are fed directly to the media by the army. 'Let's be honest about it,' says a recruiter, 'we can do local boy stories every day of the week,' it's just a matter of 'our marketing guys … getting the right story in the press' (personal interview, March 2011).

There are also now regular public military events in communities across the valleys: charity rugby matches and other fundraising events for Help for Heroes, Afghan Heroes, the Welsh Guards Afghanistan Appeal, or Healing the Wounds; Armed Forces Day celebrations and Remembrance Day commemorations; homecoming parties and parades; and, on occasion, military funerals. Most of these are framed as explicitly Welsh events, marked by the prominent display of Welsh flags. Starting in the summer of 2008, local councils in the valleys, as elsewhere in Wales, began conferring special 'Freedom of the County Borough' status upon the recently formed Royal Welsh regiment: Bridgend in 2008; Neath Port Talbot in 2009; Rhondda Cynon Taff, Torfaen and Caerphilly in 2010; Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr Tydfil in 2011. These awards, which are marked by public ceremonies and military parades, represent the epitome of contemporary militarism in the region. As the Mayor of Caerphilly noted:

> The Freedom of the Borough is extremely prestigious, and is not something that is given away lightly or often. It is the highest accolade that this council can bestow, and it is granted for outstanding service to, or achievement associated with the Caerphilly county borough. (Caerphilly County Borough Council 2010: 1)

No other group of public sector workers – not teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, police or firefighters – are being given Freedom of the Borough privileges in the valleys today. Nor do we see any of these groups marching in full uniform through the town centres of Ebbw Vale, Aberdare or Pontypridd, to the cheers and support of local citizens. Rather, this is something that has been marked as the prerogative of those serving in the British military.

Parades, homecomings, Armed Forces Day celebrations, educational programmes, media stories, even funerals in the south Wales valleys, though organised locally, have all been shaped by broader state policy. Faced by widespread public opposition to its wars in Iraq

and Afghanistan, the British government became increasingly concerned, over the course of the past decade, with the project of reshaping relationships between the public and military in Britain (McCartney 2010; Tulloch 2010; Ware 2010). In June 2006, the government held the country's first Veterans Days (later to be renamed Armed Forces Day), and Chancellor Gordon Brown marked the occasion by announcing a pilot scheme to expand the Combined Cadet Force (CCF) programme into six state schools across the country: one of these was Treorchy. The stated purpose of the CCF expansion, according to Brown, was to get young people in Britain 'to come to understand, value and aspire to those qualities of service, comradeship, bravery and sacrifice that the veterans of our armed forces have demonstrated so admirably' (*Daily Mail* 2006). In December 2007, the British government launched a comprehensive review of civil-military relations. This review, as Ware (2010: 6) notes, 'conspicuously omitted' the issue of 'public hostility to New Labour's wars,' and instead blamed the 'growing gulf' between public and military in the UK on the military's lack of public visibility. The review thus 'ushered in a new era of public relations work' and 'proposed a radical new programme of outreach with civil society,' including 'detailed suggestions … on how to improve communications with media, schools, politicians and business leaders' (Ware 2010: 6). Most of the manifestations of cultural militarism seen in the south Wales valleys today were explicitly promoted by the UK government-commissioned *National Recognition of Our Armed Forces* report (Davies, Clark and Sharp 2008).

Cultural militarism in the south Wales valleys has also been shaped and supported by the Welsh government. The process of devolution that began in Wales in 1999 might have been expected to entail a move away from regional support for the British military, due both to the ascendence of a political project of promoting Welsh rather than British national identity, as well as a tradition of anti-militarism that has been a core part of some strands of Welsh nationalism. In many ways, however, the opposite has occurred. One of the challenges for the new Welsh state in constructing a distinct Welsh nation has been the lack of clearly Welsh-identified institutions for the majority of the Welsh population who are not Welsh speaking (Day 2002: 253-257). Through the first decade of its existence, the Welsh government thus sought to link itself in the public eye with the Welsh regiments of the British military, as being among the most visible sites for celebrating English speaking Welsh identity. In 2005, Welsh First Minister Rhodri Morgan made a St David's Day visit to Iraq to meet with soldiers from the Welsh regiments (BBC News 2005). In 2006, the official opening of the Senedd, the new home of the National Assembly for Wales, was marked by a Royal Salute from the Welsh Guards and Royal Welsh (NAW 2006). In 2010, the Welsh Assembly Government co-hosted (with the UK Ministry of Defence) the second British Armed Forces

Day national event in Cardiff, an event that prominently involved all of the army's Welsh regiments, as well as Welsh-based squadrons of the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy. The army's regimental system, of course, was set up in the nineteenth century precisely with the goal of fostering local support for and identification with the British military (French 2005); and the Welsh regiments themselves encourage their identification with the Welsh nation, celebrating St David's Day and prominently flying the Welsh flag at all of their public events. Indeed, one of the more striking images of Welsh nationalism today may be found at regimental homecoming celebrations in Tidworth and Aldershot, where the 2nd Batallion The Royal Welsh and Welsh Guards are based. These celebrations, located deep within England, are marked by the flying and waving, not of the Union Jack, but the Flag of Wales instead.

A Ring Around the Valleys: The Military Training Area and Defence Industry 'Donut'
Though military recruiting and military culture are clearly visible within south Wales valleys communities, the direct presence of military institutions is not. When the UK Ministry of Defence released a fact sheet detailing its military footprint in Wales, the south Wales valleys merited almost no mention at all. Indeed, it was one of the few regions in Wales *not* to be highlighted in any way (MoD, undated). In the valleys, there are no garrison towns, no military bases, no barracks, no major military installations or landholdings. In the wake of its contraction in the late 1990s, the Territorial Army has only a handful of offices left in the region; and even military recruiting is conducted mostly from offices outside the valleys. If you look at a map of the British military footprint in south Wales, the valleys region appears as an empty space that is encircled by military institutions and properties. To the north lie Sennybridge (Britain's third largest military training area), Brecon (headquarters of the British Army in Wales), Crickhowell (site of an RAF and Army Cadet training camp) and the Brecon Beacons National Park (which, like other national parks in Britain, is used by the military as a training area) (Cole 2010; Woodward 1999). To the south, runs a string of military and defence industry establishments, stretching from a BAE Systems factory in Glascoed in the east, to a Thales UK plant in Llangennech in the west.

Yet, despite this absence in the valleys themselves, the south Wales valleys region has a long and intimate relationship with the military institutions encircling it. During the Second World War, as part of the government's effort to disperse strategically important defence industries, five Royal Ordnance Factories were built in south Wales (including one at Hirwaun, at the top of the Cynon Valley), and war related manufacturing work was brought to industrial estates in the valleys towns of Merthyr Tydfil and Treforest. These new manufacturing bases, for the most part, did not retain their military links after the war (though

the BAE Systems plant at Glascoed is a former Royal Ordnance Factory). But they did fundamentally change the valleys: they created an experienced manufacturing workforce in the region, a new set of large and ready-to-use industrial buildings and estates, and a legacy of large-scale government intervention in directing regional industrial development, that together led to the emergence of the south Wales valleys in the following decades as a national centre of light manufacturing (Raco 2007; Williams 2002; Willis 1972). The Royal Ordnance Factory at Hirwaun, for example, became an industrial estate where companies such as GEC and Hitachi manufactured colour televisions and other electronics and consumer goods. Though these industries subsequently disappeared, today the Hirwaun estate is undergoing another round of development, with the construction of a recycling and energy generation plant.

More recently, the south Wales valleys have played a pivotal, if indirect role in the Welsh government's attempts to build up the region's defence industry base. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Wales had one of the lowest rates of defence spending and employment of any region in the UK (Lovering 1985, 1991). But over the last decade, the Welsh Assembly Government (along with the Wales Office, former Welsh Development Agency, and Welsh MPs in Westminster) has sought to build up the Welsh defence sector, by attracting some of the world's largest defence corporations to set up operations in the M4 corridor that runs along the south end of the valleys: General Dynamics was brought to Oakdale in 2001; EADS came to Newport in 2001 and opened a new research and development facility there in 2003; Oshkosh secured a Ministry of Defence contract for its Llantrisant factory in 2003; and in 2009, Thales UK was brought to Llangennech. There were also failed attempts to bring in Northrop Grumman, as well as a private military training consortium led by QinetiQ and Raytheon. Some of these corporations have set up local supply chains, so there are now companies that subcontract military work throughout the valleys region. The defence industry has been attractive to Welsh political elites because it is seen as a high tech, high skill, high prestige sector, that has been flourishing over the last decade, thanks to the growth in global military spending that has been driven by the US-led war on terror. The proximity of south Wales to Bristol, a centre which has long had a strong defence industry presence, has also been significant (Lovering 1985). One reason that General Dynamics UK agreed to set up its European headquarters in Oakdale in the south Wales valleys, for example, is that Oakdale is located within a one hour driving distance of the UK Ministry of Defence Procurement Agency in Bristol (Select Committee on Welsh Affairs 2005).

The success of this political project in militarising Wales should not be exaggerated. Wales still has one of the lowest levels of defence spending and employment of any region in the UK (Schofield 2008; Welsh Affairs Committee 2006). But this project has set up a development cycle in which social and economic deprivation, concentrated in areas such as the south Wales valleys, leads to high levels of military enlistment, as well as the availability of targeted regional assistance funds; these enlistment levels and funds are then mobilised to attract inward defence industry investment; and global defence corporations, having invested in Wales, seek to embed themselves within the local community and economy, deepening the region's connections and dependence on military production and service. For in seeking to attract defence industry investment in Wales, Welsh politicians have used two key strategies. The first is directed at defence companies, as the Welsh government uses Regional Selective Assistance (and other) funds to lure in these companies. General Dynamics UK, for example, was given £5.2 million in Regional Selective Assistance grant support to build its European headquarters on top of a former valleys mine site in Oakdale.

The second strategy is directed at the British government, as all of Wales's defence corporations derive most of their business from contracts with the UK Ministry of Defence. Welsh politicians have used the high levels of enlistment of young Welsh men and women in the British military as grounds for demanding corresponding UK government investment, via the Ministry of Defence, in Wales. Previously, high levels of military enlistment in Wales, and especially, the valleys, have been a cause for concern among local politicians. In 2003, for example, the MP for the Rhondda Valley, Chris Bryant, spoke critically about the matter in a House of Commons debate on the depressed conditions of Britain's former mining regions:

> Is the Minister aware that last year the Coalfields Regeneration Trust conducted a survey of what children at schools in coalfield communities thought was the ideal job? By far the most popular choice was going into the armed forces. Do we not need to do a lot to change that culture? (Hansard 2003: c204WH)

But as the project of seeking to attract defence industry spending has taken hold in Wales, high levels of military enlistment have been reconfigured as a regional asset and are used as leverage to demand matching levels of military investment. In a House of Commons debate on defence spending in Wales in December 2010, Welsh MPs collectively insisted on the justice of such proportionality:

> Sian James, Swansea East: Wales makes up 5% of the UK population, but contributes 8% of the armed forces. The Government pride themselves on fairness,

so surely Wales should receive an equal proportion of military spending. South-east England receives £7.1 billion pounds and Scotland receives £1.5 billion, but Wales receives just £390 million.

Nick Smith, Blaenau Gwent: Blaenau Gwent contributes many servicemen and women to our armed forces, and we have had some great armed forces days in recent years. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: according to statistics that I have seen, Wales receives just £380 million in defence expenditure. Surely that is not enough. (Hansard 2010: c69-70WH)

Rhondda MP Chris Bryant, who previously sought to raise concern about the high level of military enlistment in his valleys constituency, now celebrates this as something of which Wales and the Rhondda can be proud (Hansard 2011; Livingstone 2007). In evidence given to the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee in 2006, Bryant referred to the same Coalfields Regeneration Trust survey he had cited three years earlier, only this time not to question the militarisation of youth culture in the valleys, but demand proper reward for it:

My simple point is that Wales is roughly 6% of the population and we produce 9% of the Armed Forces. There are five lads in my street in Porth in Rhondda who are in the Army. The latest survey done by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust showed that the preferred career for a young person in a former mining constituency is the Armed Forces. For me, there is an element of fairness about that, that it would be only fair for Wales to get its fair share of that expenditure. (Welsh Affairs Committee 2006: Ev 19).

In emphasizing high levels of military enlistment, Welsh politicians are not only making an argument for proportionate compensation from the British government. They are also seeking to show, both to the Ministry of Defence and its industry subcontractors, that communities in Wales are strongly supportive of and connected to the British military. To the extent these demands for increased military spending in Wales are successful, such representations stand to become ever more true. For global defence corporations, on coming to Wales, are keen to establish themselves locally. They do this not only through local subcontracting and maintaining close ties with local politicians, but through direct engagement with local communities. General Dynamics UK in Oakdale, for example, has launched community engagement projects across the south Wales valleys: it helped a primary school in Caerphilly develop a state-of-the-art IT suite for its pupils; it supports the work of the Wild Trout Trust in restoring the natural habitat of the River Taff; and it sponsors the local Rugby Football Club in Newbridge.

Conclusion

An army recruiter working in the south Wales valleys reflects on his concerns about the motivations that sometimes drive the military recruiting process. A dedicated soldier himself, he worries that many of the 'young lads' he meets, who want to join the army, 'are attracted by the idea of being on the frontline and seeing action,' and notes that 'whenever there is a series of killings of soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan that are reported on TV,' there is actually an 'increase in recruits coming in through the front door.' 'It is because they are young,' he says, 'and the idea of death and injury is just an abstraction to them, it is not real to them.' The recruiter says that, as a consequence, he tries to:

> emphasize the harsh reality of what being a soldier is about. It's not just about travel and adventure and jumping out of airplanes and fun things like that. It is often camping out in cold, wet, uncomfortable conditions, and there is danger and risk.

But, the recruiter now feels, perhaps he has been 'overemphasizing the negative aspects of soldiering.' His wife saw him present recently at a school careers day and told him he was being too negative. She reminded him that 'for young people and families around here, the army offers a good job when they don't have any alternatives, it offers real opportunities.' The recruiter agrees that he 'needs to emphasize that too.' He doesn't like 'to hear recruits say that the reason they are joining the army is because there are no other jobs.' But he recognizes that 'economic conditions are a strong motivator for enlisting,' and now with the recession coming on, 'there is an increase in people trying to join the army.'

Such dilemmas and worries lie at the heart of the relationship between the south Wales valleys as a region and military recruitment, work and culture. For some in the valleys, military work really does open doors and opportunities they would not have had otherwise. Many who served in the British military and have now returned to their valley homes talk about the benefits of having 'gotten out' and been able to 'learn a career.' With military work, however, there are inevitably going to be deep concerns, questions and costs that need to be acknowledged and addressed as well. There are the challenges and risks that military work poses for individual soldiers and their families: the pain and struggle of absence and distance; the ever-present possibility of serious injury, illness and death; and the difficulties that some soldiers face when they try to re-integrate into civilian society after their periods of military service have ended (Atherton 2009; Dimbleby 2011; Stanford 2011). In 2011, the National Assembly for Wales launched an inquiry into the problems experienced by Welsh military veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); and support groups for veterans struggling with PTSD, other forms of trauma and depression, substance abuse

and unemployment are now springing up across the south Wales valleys and the rest of Wales (NAW 2011). There are also serious questions about what soldiers are asked to do while in the military, about the actual role the British military plays in its overseas operations, and the greater purpose that this risky and violent form of work is serving. The fear for many in the UK today, when they look at the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, is that, at best, as one valleys veteran from Tonyrefail puts it, 'we achieved the square root of fucking jack shit out there' (Harnden 2011: 507). Finally, there is the question of choice, and the concern that military work – which is such a high risk and potentially high impact form of employment – needs to be undertaken freely, and in a fully informed and reasoned capacity. The problem in regions such as the south Wales valleys is that these and other such questions and concerns become extraordinarily difficult to address.

Economic deprivation and a lack of locally available jobs are, above all else, what drive high levels of military enlistment in the south Wales valleys. These high levels of military enlistment, in turn, are a key part of what drives the close engagement of local social, cultural, political and economic life with the institutions, practices and culture of the British military and British militarism. Over time, this close social, cultural, political and economic engagement takes on a life and momentum and degree of autonomy all of its own. Broader state policies and development agendas, meanwhile, both at the level of Wales and the UK as a whole, rather than seeking to question and challenge these deprivation driven and culturally interpreted and supported cycles of deep military engagement, function instead only to entrench them further. In order to understand the phenomenon of militarism in contemporary British society – and, most importantly, to be able to envision and move toward alternative ways of approaching the question of military work and culture nationally in Britain, as well as promoting economic development and social well-being regionally, in places such as the south Wales valleys – it is essential that, as Bernazzoli and Flint (2010: 165) argue, we be able to 'recognise and understand the everyday geographies of militarization,' as these are constructed at the local and regional levels.

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