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The possibilities and limits of exploring the mobilities of military personnel.

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Considering military mobilities sometimes involves some very practical questions. For all that we can consider mobilities issues within military institutions and militarised contexts, and personal, individual mobilities in conceptual terms as a means of unpacking the nature of military mobilities, if we are concerned with an empirically-informed social scientific approach, then at some point we have to consider the generation of data to inform these ideas. Whilst this inevitably involves thinking through the puzzles of data collection as in any research approach or topic, there are issues specific to the mobilities of military personnel, and the application of mobile methods in military contexts, which shape the possibilities and limits of data collection. It is these possibilities and limits which provide the focus here.

Military personnel – soldiers, sailors, air force personnel, marines – live and work within organisations in which the idea of personal mobility is quite fundamental (Woodward and Jenkins, 2014). Capturing data with which to explore and theorise those mobilities is not necessarily straightforward. At issue is not only the proposition that the context of military worlds may be quite profoundly different from civilian worlds as to require a methodological re-think – although one of the issues at stake here is a broader conceptual one of the extent and limits to military specificity, and a political question about the extent to which military organisations and personnel can and should be thought of as somehow distinct from a broader civilian world, or not. More specifically, it is a question of the practicalities of generating and constructing research data. There are questions of what can be seen, observed and visualised, and the limits to this. For example, the work of artist and writer Matthew Flintham engages with exactly this task of capturing the mobile, invisible boundaries of military airspace (Flintham, 2016). There are questions around the availability and utility of secondary data in the form of quantitative data and statistics about military personnel and their lives, and the extent to which key features of mobile military operational and institutional practice might be simply untraceable. For example, a military career at any rank and in any service will involve a point of origin on joining the armed forces and a point of leaving, with individualised consequences and a host of complex sociological and geographical processes inflected by and constitutive of social structures in localities, yet data on recruitment and demobilisation often

cannot capture the geographies created by this (Herman and Yarwood, 2014). There are questions about the extent to which documentary and archive materials, for all their recording of personnel movements, can actually capture the intricacies of military mobilities through time and space. It may be the case, then, that constructing data to understand military mobilities may be generally quite challenging.

Then there are the practical issues around data on the mobilities of military personnel which may have nothing to do with mobilities in and of themselves, but which reflect the military contexts of study (see Soeters et al, 2014; Castro et al, in press). For reasons of operational security there may be restrictions on access to personnel and information about their movements through time and space. There may be defence institutional assumptions resistant to wider public transparency about mobilities even where there are no operational security issues at stake. We, as researchers, face our own assumptions about what and who we can get access to in military communities, and what we might be able to do when we get there, and these assumptions may be shaped by our own institutional restrictions on mobilities in terms of health and safety assessments for fieldwork, ethical guidelines, and insurance cover for fieldwork deemed risky.

But there are also practicalities about the generation of data about the mobilities of military personnel which have everything to do with those very mobilities themselves. For example, in many armed forces, there is a level of individualised mobility built into career structures and job rotations such that gatekeepers and contacts move on, rendering sustained contact difficult. The often-noted conservatism of military institutions may be suspicious of methodologies which stray too far from commonly held assumptions about the appropriate and 'normal' ways of doing research. Mobile methods, with their enthusiastic and necessary development of novel and experimental research techniques such as go-along ethnographies or the use of interactive GIS-based mapping or the development of respondent-generated visual or textual materials, may simply be too strange or unusual to those from whom we seek informed consent. There is also the burden of time and effort such research techniques may impose on our research participants.

Exploring the mobilities of military personnel, then, presents an array of practical issues to be thought through, questions of possibilities and limits. But there is something beyond this, about what these possibilities and limits might in turn mean for the questions that we can ask about military mobilities, and the extent to which theorising about the mobilities of military personnel might be shaped by these practicalities. The two issues here which seem particularly pertinent are access to military personnel sufficient to capture their mobilities (using whatever research technique

is deemed appropriate), and that of researcher capabilities suited to the generation of data on those mobilities.

The issue of access to military personnel for the purposes of research – any research – is one that sits at the core of discussions of social scientific inquiry about armed forces (Williams et al, 2016). Gaining access to military personnel in order to explore their mobilities is not impossible and examples of published work from those who have done so have been influential in shaping how we consider those mobilities. Although not written as an account of military mobilities, the ethnographic work undertaken by John Hockey in order to write his seminal work of military sociology *Squaddies* (1986) is a case in point. In unpacking the negotiated orders at work in an infantry unit, at scales from the regional (he accompanied the platoon on a Northern Ireland deployment and on exercises to Canada) to the personal (he lived and worked with the platoon, getting close, always observing) Hockey's *Squaddies* sets out the mobilities of military personnel (and a great deal else besides) informed by close ethnographic work. There are questions, inevitably, of the limits to this access (though the liminal and private spaces of soldiering were open to Hockey in this case) as well as the inevitable issue of what needed to be left out in his final published account. But *Squaddies* remains an authoritative work of military sociology precisely because of the degree of access to his platoon that he was able to negotiate, and in turn is indicative of the levels required in order to inform some of the debates around the performance and experience of mobilities by military personnel.

There is also an issue, when exploring the mobilities of military personnel, of researcher capabilities and limitations. As Hockey himself notes (2016), his prior military experience and high levels of fitness as a distance runner meant that he had the physical and mental capacity to do this work. Another illustrative case, Anthony King's *The Combat Soldier* (2013), shows that although these are not necessarily firm pre-requisites for informed analysis of military mobilities, researcher capability is certainly a factor. King's book is not framed as an exposition of military mobilities, but rather as an argument about cohesion in combat units. However, with its detailed exploration of the role of drills and communicative acts in determining the cohesion of a fighting unit, it becomes clear that this requires close attention to the mobilities of military personnel through space in combat tasks, and the planning and management of that by those undertaking such tasks. King's levels of access to training exercises is certainly a factor in enabling the generation of data through which to draw conclusions. But what is particularly interesting is the extent to which *The Combat Soldier* shows that it is the mobilities of the researcher that count, in terms of being able to (literally, physically) keep up with what's going on, and thus being able to *understand* what is happening as platoons set out planning and executing tasks. In this instance, King has been able to add quite significantly to

the debates on unit cohesion. There remains an open question, though, about how a researcher's capabilities to be mobile in turn shapes the questions that can be asked of military phenomena in the first place, the concepts that can be developed, and in turn the arguments that can be articulated about the mobilities of military personnel.

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