



UNIVERSITY OF
GLOUCESTERSHIRE

This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document and is licensed under All Rights Reserved license:

Hockey, John C ORCID: 0000-0002-5826-8005 (2016) The Aesthetic of Being in the Field: Participant Observation with Infantry. In: The Routledge Companion to Military Research Methods. Routledge, London, pp. 207-218. ISBN 9781472442758

Official URL: <https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Companion-to-Military-Research-Methods/Williams-Jenkins-Woodward-Rech/p/book/9781472442758>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/3740>

Disclaimer

The University of Gloucestershire has obtained warranties from all depositors as to their title in the material deposited and as to their right to deposit such material.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation or warranties of commercial utility, title, or fitness for a particular purpose or any other warranty, express or implied in respect of any material deposited.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation that the use of the materials will not infringe any patent, copyright, trademark or other property or proprietary rights.

The University of Gloucestershire accepts no liability for any infringement of intellectual property rights in any material deposited but will remove such material from public view pending investigation in the event of an allegation of any such infringement.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR TEXT.

Accepted for publication 8 March 2016.

Published in: Williams, A.J., Jenkins, K.N., Rech, M.F. & Woodward, R. (eds) (2016) *The Routledge Companion to Military Research Methods*, London: Routledge, pp.207-218.

The Aesthetic of Being in the Field: Participant Observation with Infantry

John Hockey

Introduction

A useful and concise definition of participant observation is that offered by Emerson et al. (2002:352): ‘Participant observation – establishing a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis in order to investigate, experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in that setting...’. The literature on using this method with infantry (e.g. Pipping, 1947/2008, Little, 1964, Ben-Ari, 1998, Segal, 2001, King, 2006, Tortorello, 2010, Irwin, 2012, MacLeish, 2012) and the similar occupation of private military contractor (e.g. Higate, 2012) is not extensive. One of the reasons for this lack of research is the still relatively closed nature of military institutions and the problem of gaining access to troops (Jenkins et al., 2011), but another reason may well be that researchers are put off from engaging with this occupational group due to their perceptions of the difficulties of engaging in fieldwork with them. This chapter will explore the reality of undertaking such research.

During 1979-1980 I carried out three months participant observation with British Army infantry, fieldwork which covered initial organizational socialisation at a Basic Training Depot, everyday life within an operational Battalion in the contexts of barracks, field exercises in UK/Canada and operational deployment in South Armagh (Northern Ireland) whilst the conflict with the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) was on-going. The great majority of this fieldwork was of the 24hour variety, an immersion that provided the material for an ethnography (Hockey, 1986). My vocabulary of motives (Mills, 1940) for doing the research was a complicated one. As with most fieldworkers I did not come empty handed to the field. I wanted to produce an ethnography of the subculture of the infantry and what I had in mind was a work which fitted with the Chicago School of occupational ethnographers who had pioneered urban participant observation. I chose that method as I evaluated it as the only means which would allow me to chart the complexity of the subculture, in particular the relationships within it between conduct, context and change, with change being measured not in years but in days and hours. Change assessment is motivated, as Vidich (1971: 171) notes, by the 'desire of, and necessity for, individuals...to act in terms of what is possible in specific immediate situations'. That was the general research approach I aspired to and was inspired by. As a result the main theoretical lens I brought to participant observation was essentially a Meadian sociological social-psychology (Mead, 1934) which underpinned much of the Chicago School's output and which has a strong focus upon the interactional foundations of social processes. In addition, prior to entering university as a mature student I had been an army Corporal and encountered sociology by chance, an epiphany which changed the course of my life. So I brought to the research a powerful desire to investigate sociologically my former life and to find out who I had been. The biographical impulse also meant that what I produced analytically, I now realise is not so much an ethnography of UK infantry but one essentially about infantry privates and NCOs. I am

struck now by what little material relatively speaking there is within my ethnography on officers, a state of affairs propelled by my desire to tell a research story about ‘other ranks’ which at the time had not previously been told in a sociological fashion. After all, I had been one of them. What follows is based on my ethnographic field notes, particularly those on my experience of doing participant observation, in other words my craft practices in the field.

On Context, Self and Trust

Doing participant observation effectively demands a combination of analytic and social skills. Crucially the former cannot be practiced unless a sound social relationship with one’s participants has been established via the use of the latter, otherwise social closure is highly likely with the outcome being no insightful data and the possible demise of one’s research. Thus, I knew the establishment of *trust* between myself and troops was to be the highest priority. The research context in which I found myself had a number of features which are unlikely to be found in civilian occupational environments in such an encompassing combination. Firstly, the infantry is overwhelmingly a physically demanding environment. Secondly, the infantry was (and perhaps still is) an environment saturated with traditional masculinity (there are no women in the UK infantry) and heterosexuality. Thirdly, there are episodic features of risk to participants within it¹. All these features influenced my research process and I will point out their impact as this narrative progresses. Entering this particular social world as a researcher and ‘stranger’, I was met with a collective curiosity and evaluated not by my own standard but those of my research participants. This was aptly put

¹ A fourth feature for the research context was ordered by military law and I have written elsewhere (Hockey, 1996) on how I as a researcher responded to the treatment of troops by superiors, which by civilian standards was authoritarian and on occasion draconian.

to me by one Private: ‘We wanted to know what kind of lad you were and were interested to see what this civvie (civilian) had about him. We thought you might be some kind of short haired hippy given you were from the University!’

Prior to the research I had suspected that this kind of evaluation might take place and that there were likely to be tests of me before I could be defined as a ‘good bloke’ (or otherwise, and thus detrimental to my research) and thus someone who could be trusted and in turn engaged with openly. I therefore needed to pass the tests. Fortunately I had a number of resources available to deal with these challenges and these were: a life- time knowledge of working class culture, military experience prior to entering university and a serious engagement with competitive distance running. Using these resources in Goffman’s (1974) terms I presented a particular kind of self when in the field. This self was a thoroughly embodied one, for as Crossley (1995: 47) stresses the mind is inseparable from the body as they remain ‘reversible aspects of a single fabric’. The most habitual medium of testing was how I talked with troops. That communication had certain narrative and linguistic features rooted in wider UK male working class culture but which were accentuated within the infantry subculture. For example, swearing was pervasive, language was direct, immediate and often loud, and for the most part bereft of the more mediated, arguably stilted, linguistic forms characteristic of UK middle class culture. Language in this way was used as a challenge to me to see how I responded, particularly to aggressive humour in the form of banter (see Collinson, 1988), in troops’ argot: ‘having the piss taken’ or ‘getting ‘em going’. These rapid bantering forms demand a particular response in kind, so one takes it and gives it back and one then may or may not ‘pass the test’. Showing embarrassment or even more so anger constitute failure, and provokes more aggressive banter. Some of these occasions were quite elaborate and on occasion constituted ambushes of a particular ilk for the researcher.

For example, there was great interest in my sexuality based on a general perception of university life being something akin to ‘a posh Play Boy Club’ (as one Private commented):

I got wound-up earlier by the lads. Talking to Corporal G, who slowly brought up women and sex, and ‘positions’ (that was the trap!), this imperceptibly lead onto masturbation and when asked I admitted to it. Whereupon, the remainder of the Section who had been sitting ostensibly preoccupied with the intricacies of cleaning SLR’s [weapons] suddenly collectively chanted ‘Dirty Wanker!’ Accompanied by vigorous, collective hand simulations...To which I replied with my best V sign and ‘at least I am not having to go buy IT (sex) in Edmonton when we go on R & R!’ [rest and recuperation]. The latter strategy being a stated objective of the Section. All then grinning and I got told by M that I was not a bad lad for someone who was Welsh. (Fieldnotes, Training Area, Alberta, Canada)

The last line of the above example of course produced more banter about supposed Welsh characteristics and on we went, as these exchanges were pervasive within the subculture and as an outsider one had to be always ready for them, perennially. On one’s toes, so to speak, so as to be able to play this particular language game. To do this effectively I drew upon the biographical resources I have previously mentioned. The only comparable experiences my participants had of civilian outsiders had been a visit by various journalists, a group who in a Lance-Corporal’s words had ‘hung about for a few hours, had drinks with the officers, and fucked off after being nosey’. In contrast I was staying for an extended period of time and, because I was also participating and not just observing, my physical performance was also viewed with intense interest. Simply put with few exceptions I did what ‘the lads’ did physically. So I marched for long distances carrying heavy loads, clunked along in heavy boots on morning runs, clambered over assault course obstacles, sweated, got cut, bruised, blistered, wet, frozen and fried on ranges and training areas. I stank with them after no

showers for long periods. I defecated in the open air with them (sometimes collectively). I postured on early morning seaside promenades with them after night clubs had thrown us out and ‘friendly fighting’ was ‘just the job to end a good night out John!’(Private). In essence all this constituted a corporeal performance to my participants illustrating not so much that I was fit enough to do the activities but rather more importantly that I was prepared to and would *endure with them*. What was interesting to discover about this process was that whilst I was fit (due to distance running) that did not mean that I was fit to TAB (march) with a large Bergen (rucksack). Fitness comes in particular forms so I had to rapidly relearn that particular form. In addition lots of field exercise activities were completed on little sleep, again a somewhat uncomfortable relearning for the researcher. I knew from my previous military service that within the infantry world a fundamental theme of stoicism was prevalent. Simply put, one soldiered on in the face of adversity and, one did not ‘jack one’s hand in’. This stoicism also encompassed verbal interaction as I was already aware that frequently complaining in the face of physical adversity was not a characteristic that was admired by troops. So whilst I may have complained lots internally I did not habitually externalise those thoughts. The result of all this verbal and corporeal work was to realise a certain presentation of self, resulting in me receiving over time, indicators which pointed to me being categorised as a ‘good bloke’. The following examples I regarded as particularly salient:

The Company is dug-in and has dropped off bergens, sleeping bags, all the heavy gear. At dawn the attack phase of the exercise commences and that means everyone will be having to move fast. Tonight we are freezing. Those who are not ‘on stag’ [sentry] get out of their trenches, and huddle together below the ridge-line in hollows. Jack a Lance Corporal, Jim and Dave-both privates, and me share a single poncho... With three it’s just about effective and the mutual body heat is comforting. With a 4th body, the poncho is stretched too far, and the heat escapes, so you just freeze more

slowly. Yet there is no suggestion I be excluded, rather I am told ‘get in here dipstick [stupid]!’ (Fieldnotes, Training Area, Alberta, Canada)

Warrant Officer, Corporal and me standing having a brew waiting to watch ‘Hot Gossip’ [a dance group] on Top of the Pops [TV]. No seats left as this is the big highlight of the week and all who can watch pile in, some securing rickety chairs half an hour before kick-off. W.O to me: ‘When you are out (on patrol) with the boys John, if there is a contact (with PIRA) do what they say, OK?’ Before I can reply Cpl B responds: ‘He’ll be alright he’s a good lad, not daft like’. HG starts, talk stops, the lads wolf whistle and all have ‘eyes on’ for the girls... (Fieldnotes, Crossmaglen Base, South Armagh, Northern Ireland)

Ultimately when doing participant observation of this type if one trusts one’s participants one has to commit to them keeping one safe, a commitment about which there seems to be relatively little fieldwork literature (e.g. Kovats-Bernat, 2002). Trust involves one making ‘the ‘leap of faith’ that brackets ignorance and doubt’ (Mollering, 2006: 372); the following instance ended a long session of what was described as ‘rough and tumble’ on one morning parade:

Lots of intermittent running, jumping, climbing, carrying kit and each other this morning. Ending in various I suppose what you can call confidence and team building exercises. The last was where the lads lined up in two lines and linked arms so there was a sort of long cradle. Then everyone took turns in sprinting and diving headfirst into the cradle. On my turn the Sergeant shouts ‘right lets drop John on his big university head!’ – just before I sprinted. Lots of laughter. One, two three and into their arms! Very symbolic. (Fieldnotes, Barracks, North West)

On Knowing

How I coped with being immersed in the infantry world was by using the aforementioned resources to talk to troops and engage in their activities. I also used these resources to look after myself mundanely. So for example, I knew how to look after my feet which often took a hammering given that I had not worn boots for years. I also knew to keep hydration and slow-burn carbohydrate levels topped up all the time. Also that possessing curry powder made any combination of composite rations palatable, even an all-in-one of rice pudding and Irish stew which I partook in collectively one freezing night on a Northern training area. This knowledge about care of the self was not only about physical comfort, for it also helped foster a relative psychological ease with aspects of the surrounding militarised environment:

I have been struck by how I have been reacting to the lack of privacy when doing this research. I wonder how another fieldworker with a different biography would have reacted to that feature? My whole living space for me and my bit of kit is the middle tier of a 3 tier bunk. Top bunk bloke can touch the ceiling and we can all touch the side walls with our heads if we roll over. Two long lines of bunks with a small isle in the middle. No windows. Constant noise, light, patrols going out and coming in on a 24 hour cycle. Every spare inch festooned with weapons, bergens, etc. The bloke above me keeps his loaded mags [rifle magazines], spare ammo and smoke flares stuffed between his mattress and the springs. If I lift up slightly I can almost touch them with my nose! Of course I know what that kit can and cannot do, so I am ok with it being there. I realise I have slotted back into a way of living I intimately knew once. (Fieldnotes, in the 'Submarines', Crossmaglen Base)

The above knowledge and the commonplace practices which it facilitated meant that *crucially* I was not a nuisance to troops, and they did not have to look after me in situations in

which there were often huge demands on their own resources. This was an additional factor which I believe contributed to their positive perception of me. Doing the research meant there was a certain degree of risk attached to it. On an everyday level being around people who have loaded weapons constitutes said risk. Interestingly, when initially with armed troops I found myself watching how they moved around with weapons, as my past knowledge seemed automatically to be invoked in evaluating weapon handling procedures for safety. I did this even more so when in the same kind of situation with recruits who after all are learners. I also used my prior knowledge to make decisions about my activity when risky situations manifested themselves. This knowledge and the decisions that flowed from it did not always contribute positively to the research. The prime example was when CS (riot gas) training was underway which involved troops being exposed to the gas. I knew from my military experience that such exposure was highly unpleasant. Previously I had told troops that 'I would do things with you', but in this instance I did not do so, motivated by a concern for my distance runners lungs. I then experienced a period of social closure from them putting my research in jeopardy. Subsequently I had to work hard to recover my position of being accepted. In the main however my military knowledge worked productively for me when evaluating how much exposure to risk I was prepared to tolerate.

Off with the Mortar boys! Who were looking forward to a Boss [excellent] time as lots of ammo was available. On mortar line with five teams firing, everyone happy. I am with one team and after about 10 minutes firing a bomb dropped in the tube does not fire. Misfire! Serious as the live bomb has to be extracted with a special canvas sling, taken away and exploded by the team NCO. He says to me: 'Time for you to fuck off John'. Do I stay or do I go? J circles the tube arms out like a plane shouting 'flap time, flap time', laughing and winding it all up. They were all looking at me so maybe I had a runaway stare on my face. I make the decision to stay because I know

I will get cred with the boys but also because I know that the chances are overwhelmingly that the thing will not detonate when it's extracted. (Fieldnotes, Alberta Badlands Training Area).

This kind of evaluation was even more imperative in Crossmaglen, because when out with a patrol I made a mistake. The mistake was to concentrate sociologically on making sense of what was happening with the patrol. What that meant was that I lost any tactical awareness and that manifested itself in becoming too close to the next man in the patrol. This mistake meant that I increased jeopardy for both myself and the other members, much to their considerable ire. This occurrence caused much soul searching about my responsibilities to myself and to my research participants. I was forced to consider these issues and do a form of cost benefit analysis about the kind of information being out on patrol gave me sociologically. The result was that I made the decision to curtail my exposure to that level of risk unless the information I perceived myself to need was absolutely vital. The most significant features influencing the latter decision was firstly that my attention had become divided between two tasks which was folly in an operational environment. Secondly, but perhaps even more fundamentally, was the salutatory realisation that I was no longer skilful in corporeal military practices (Hockey, 2009) as civilian life had radically transformed my previous military embodiment.

On Trying to be Analytic

There is a large literature on doing fieldwork as an 'insider' researcher and there is no space to trawl through these voluminous debates at this juncture. That said I feel it might be useful to say a few words about my particular position in relation to the specific subcultural field of infantry. A salient point in this literature is to ask: How is one an insider? (Hockey, 1993)

On one level I was an outsider due to my being a civilian, but on another level I had once been an insider and therefore was able to deploy insider knowledge in my research role. So for example, I understood a lot of the technical terms and argot troops used, but not all of the latter, some of which was unit specific. Thus the term FUBS initially made no sense (Fat, Useless Bastards) but Gimpy (General Purpose Machine Gun) did. The latter had attached to it numerous other sedimentations of understanding. Thus I knew something of its range, what it weighed and how that felt over prolonged periods, how it was loaded with ammunition, etc. This grasp gave me a bedrock of understanding so that my intellectual feet had something relatively stable to stand on initially. When one is doing participant observation there is no SLO-MO button, one cannot put the slow motion on, although when starting in the field I fervently wished for one. Initially with infantry life ceaselessly unfolding around me, I was sometimes bewildered by its pace of change and getting analytic purchase was difficult even with the bedrock of former membership and experience. What I held was something akin to a member's understanding of military reality, an understanding which admittedly as the years had passed had become somewhat blurred and inconsistent. Yet this understanding could still map out the main parameters of soldierly existence and it allowed me to relate very quickly to the meaning and import of troops' conduct.

Some members of the unit I was with knew I had done previous military service but the great majority seemed not to and I did not volunteer this information unless asked. What this allowed me to do was to ask naïve questions about their life, and it allowed them to volunteer simple statements about organisational practises, and thus explain their world to me, without expectations that I already had that knowledge. One of course can only fully take advantage of this approach if one is not naïve. The advantage was that information flowed more freely between myself and the lads. Moreover, using this approach the possibilities that I was being, in unit argot, 'rubber dicked' (i.e. deceived) were minimised as my undisclosed previous

knowledge constantly monitored what was presented to me. Additionally, by using this approach I hoped to minimise the degree to which I imposed my definition of events upon things. Volunteered statements I saw as much less open to my influence and manipulation by the military knowledge I already held; as Becker (1977: 60-61) notes, there are good sociological advantages in 'playing dumb'. How much all this actually worked was at the time hard to judge, but I did try to maintain a reflexive awareness which kept me alert to the dangers of using my previous cook-book knowledge in a sociologically abusive fashion (see Ben-Ari, 1998: 135-136, for a similar anthropological concern). An event would occur and I would make an evaluation of what was happening, and then try and situate it against other similar occurrences in the research process so as to try and establish a pattern. At the same time I would contrast the happening with instances which I recalled from my own military biography (or not), and ask myself 'is this *really* what is going on?', a phrase which became something of a mantra for me as I knew what the danger was. I had after all had been a soldier and that was quite a seductive trope running through my consciousness. It was one which threatened to superimpose my past onto the troops present, with the danger of making a distorted and lazy analysis of the field.

The combination of using participant observation and my own partially militarised biography then produced, arguably, an ethnographic narrative of some analytic depth. I was able to construct this narrative because I was saturated with data which came at me on occasion literally twenty four hours a day. Subsequently I have asked myself the question 'could I have done the research with a different method?' For example, I could have produced an account based on interviews. However, what this would not have given me was the thickness of the data I accrued. What I mean by that is the everyday minutia of soldierly existence occurring in their contexts of use repeatedly:

The section are lying up, watching a track for the exercise 'enemy'. Afternoon winter rain has been sweeping over us, everything brown, green, grey, in fast falling light. Waterproofs are not really waterproof in this. D__ is lying next to me and after a while motivated I suspect by my chattering teeth he thrusts one of his water bottles at me, whispering to me with a grin 'here this will sort you out!'. It's full of barley wine, brilliant! (Fieldnotes, Training Area North)

The above instance constitutes a 'document of' (Wilson, 1974: 68) an underlying pattern of troops behaviour, one which was aimed at making their lives easier in all contexts, one which was summed up by their use of their phrase: 'Stupid soldiers can always be uncomfortable'. Yet that pattern of behaviour was essentially context dependent for its operationalization. Thus, later when on operations in South Armagh I asked D. if he was still carrying barley wine, he replied: 'No not me, I would never do that, here it's the sharp end, you can't fuck around like that it's too risky'. It is this kind of thick data that participant observation can give the researcher and which would be very difficult to access even by other qualitative methods of data collection. One does participant observation by degree, by which I mean that the level of involvement with research participants can vary (Hockey, 1993). I chose to 'do things with the lads' and apart from the odd drill parade and the CS gas incident previously depicted, my participation in their activities was high. I could have done much more observation than participation, but I am again of the view that my understanding of the complexity of the meanings specific to their social world would have been less. Immersion in activities produces not only an understanding of their meanings but it also produces exposure to sets of feelings and emotions which in turn feed back into the construction of meaning:

At the end of a 12 mile speed march with bergens and weapons, it was flat out 'balls to the wall' as the lads put it. We drop the bergens and head over to the truck on the back of which there is a brew [tea] urn, where the Colour Boy [Colour Sergeant] is also dishing

out choci bars. You can tell everyone is absolutely knackered because no one is talking, and everyone has that kind of drained look. Brews and choci do the business though and soon smiles and ‘that was Mega rough’ comments emerge. (Fieldnotes, Alberta, Badlands)

What the above episode produced in the researcher was gross fatigue and I therefore had not just a cognitive but also a sensory understanding of that as a normal feature of the infantry life. Also in that instance I understood why the Colour Boy was defined by troops as a good NCO, because he was to cite a private: ‘always looking after the lads’. In addition the particularly high level of meaning attached to mundane treats became revealed as the combination of chocolate and hot sweet tea had its visceral effect upon bodies which had just been pushed to their physical limits. The point here is that all this this analysis came from one particular instance full of thick data.

On an Aesthetic Engagement

In the cult film ‘Repo Man ‘ (Cox, 1984) about the occupation of repossessing automobiles in Los Angeles, a novice learns from a veteran, brilliantly played by Harry Dean Stanton, that ‘the life of a repo man is always intense!’. In a similar fashion one can claim that doing participant observation constitutes the most intense research method available to those wishing to do ethnographic work. The researcher’s self is the main research instrument via which data is obtained and one is liable to spend long periods of time up-close and personal with one’s research participants. Having opted for that method, if one then goes and makes the decision to do it with infantry soldiers and commits to engaging in their activities, one had better be prepared for conditions of heightened intensity particularly in relation to the features of physicality and episodic risk, in addition to a heterosexual rumbustiousness which characterises their general behaviour (Hockey, 1986: 112-122). I constructed and deployed a

way of being with infantry to which there was a particular aesthetic. Traditionally an aesthetic way of being has largely been equated with activity described as expressive, evocative, beautiful, sacred, sublime and artistic (Haapala, 2005: 39). However, this position neglects other important dimensions of experience, namely struggle and the mundane. As Leddy (2005: 8) states when calling for an aesthetics of the mundane, such an analytic lens should include not just the evocative but also displeasure. Dewey's (1980: 2) work is of help here as he places aesthetics firmly in the realm of everyday life so that any kind of experience can be aesthetic as long as it constitutes an intensification of ordinary experience. Secondly, he notes that people are often struggling to maintain an equilibrium with their surrounding environment (p.12). That striving, that intensification, that constant adaptation and re-adaptation constitutes a process out of which a particular aesthetic consciousness can be formed. For Dewey, essential to the latter are experiences of 'heightened vitality' (p.18). In the infantry world mundane work requires considerable vitality compared to most civilian occupations. Training for operational deployment and that deployment itself demands a concentrated focus of energy, individual and collective, in which absolute alertness to and immersion in the task at hand is needed. This is what Dewey terms 'wholeness' which for him constitutes the core of aesthetic being as individuals are totally immersed in their activity.

My fieldwork experience was an aesthetic one in Dewey's terms, for it embraced a combination of physically and intellectually demanding activity, together with a need for stoicism when grappling with that combination often in difficult conditions both environmentally and psychologically. It demanded unremitting attention to both my physical self and to my sociological eye. This fieldwork alertness was evident, for example, in the mundane instance of me adjusting the position of my Bergen to alleviate the debilitating load and simultaneously trying to figure out why a Private opposite me is habitually pronouncing

himself to be in a state of NFI (not fucking interested), whilst simultaneously insisting on carrying the sections heaviest weapon (GPMG) for nearly all of our twenty two mile march until he was stopped by cramp at seventeen miles. One is immersed in the moment and its meaning when a drunken Private waves a beer bottle at one whilst proclaiming one to be ‘a spy for the officers’, or when one has an overwhelmingly poignant conversation with someone who had recently accidentally killed a friend at the end of a South Armagh operational patrol. Or when one squats impotently looking on in Crossmaglen as medics work feverishly on a casualty of a PIRA attack and one knows that this for him is touch and go... Throw in periods where I was often short of sleep and I would periodically realise that I had done no sociology for a few hours at a time, then becoming immersed in intense frustration at failing with the job at hand. My fieldwork then consumed me with its intensity and I now realise I was probably at the age limit for doing it at least physically, at the time being thirty four years old, whilst the privates who surrounded me averaged out at around eighteen to twenty years. That intensity of the experience resulted in after effects which I had not foreseen. I recreated and deployed parts of a dormant self during the fieldwork but upon returning to the overwhelmingly middle class, mediated milieu of university, life was not without problems. Initially I was louder, brasher, more spontaneous and I cursed habitually, all forms of conduct which, in small ways, are akin to what Garfinkel (1967: 58) has called ‘breaching practices’. As my female partner of the time noted, ‘what was upsetting was it wasn’t the you I knew’. There is an intensity to the experience of doing participant observation generally given the amount of time and energy needed to arrange being in the field with a group of people. Once in the field, that intensity will fluctuate depending on the degree of ‘commitment’ (Becker, 1977: 261-273) the researcher displays and thus involvement in the activities of the group being studied. The more committed arguably the more encompassing the field work experience will be and thus in Dewey’s terms the more

aesthetic. Participant observation as a method for gathering data harbours the potentiality for the researcher to be consumed or saturated by the fieldwork experience. This is an experience which can bring both costs and benefits, intellectually, physically and emotionally. There is then a need for a greater portrayal of the aesthetic dimension of this particular ethnographic method. This is particularly so when engaging in research with the military, as the costs under certain conditions have the potential to be extensive.

Given the above kinds of intensity, can one's ethnographic research questions be answered using methods other than participant observation? If one decides to do the latter *how* is one going to be involved, and what are the limits? What resources does one have to have to be able to deal with the kinds of activities and stressors I have outlined? Are the research benefits liable to be worth the physical and psychological exposure? These are issues which fieldworkers need to give serious thought to before making the decision to put their booted feet into the infantry world.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Rachel Woodward for her sharp editorial eye, also once again to 'A' Company and of course the Mortar Boys!

References:

Becker, H. S. (1977). *Sociological Work: Method and Substance*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

- Ben-Ari, E. (1998). *Mastering Soldiers: Conflict, Emotions and the Enemy in an Israeli Military Unit*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Collinson, D.L. (1988). Engineering Humour: Masculinity, Joking and Conflict in Shop-floor Relations. *Organization Studies*, 9(2), 181-199.
- Cox, A. (Dir) (1984). *Repo Man*. Venice, CA: Edge City Productions.
- Crossley, N. (1995). Merleau-Ponty, the Elusive Body and Carnal Sociology. *Body & Society*, 1(1), 43-63.
- Dewey, J. (1980). *Art as Experience*. London: Perigee.
- Emerson, R.M., Fretz, R.I. & Shaw, L.L. (2002). Participant Observation and Fieldnotes, in *Handbook of Ethnography*, edited by P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland, & L. Lofland . London: Sage, 352-368,
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Haapala, A. (2005). On the aesthetics of the everyday: familiarity, strangeness and the meaning of place, in *The aesthetics of everyday life*, edited by A. Light & J.M. Smith. New York: Columbia University Press, 39-55.
- Higate, P. (2012). Cowboys and Professionals: The Politics of Identity Work in the Private Military Security Company. *Millenium*, 40 (2), 321-341.
- Hockey, J. (1986). *Squaddies: Portrait of a Subculture*. Exeter: Exeter University Press.
- Hockey, J. (1993). Research Methods: Researching Peers and Familiar Settings. *Research Papers in Education*, 8(2), 199-225.

- Hockey, J. (1996). Putting Down Smoke: Emotion and engagement in participant observation, in *Qualitative Research: The Emotional Dimension*, edited by K. Carter & S. Delamont. Aldershot: Avebury, 12-27,
- Hockey, J. (2009). Switch On: Sensory Work in the Infantry. *Work Employment and Society*, 23(3), 477-493.
- Irwin, A. (2012). There will be a lot of old young men going home: Combat and Becoming a Man in Afghanistan, in *Young Men in Uncertain Times*, edited by V. Amit & N. Dyck. Oxford: Berghahn, 59- 78,
- Jenkins, N., Woodward, R., Williams, A.J., Rech, M.F., Murphy, A.L., & Bos, D. (2011). Military Occupations: Methodological Approaches and the Military-Academy Research Nexus. *Sociology Compass*, 5(1), 37-51.
- King, A. (2006). The Word of Command: Communication and Cohesion in the Military. *Armed Forces & Society*, 32(4), 493-512.
- Kovats-Bernat, J.C. (2002). Negotiating Dangerous Fields: Pragmatic Strategies for Fieldwork amid Violence and Terror. *American Anthropologist*, 104(1), 208-222.
- Leddy, T. (2005). The nature of everyday aesthetics, in *The aesthetics of everyday life*, edited by A. Light & J.M. Smith. New York: Columbia University Press, 3-22
- Little, R.W. (1964). Buddy Relations and Combat Performance, in *The New Military*, edited by M. Janowitz. New York: Russell Sage, 195-223
- MacLeish, K.T. (2012). Armor and Anesthesia: Exposure, Feeling, and the Soldier's Body. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 26(1), 49-68.
- Mead, G.H. (1934). *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Mills, C.W. (1940). Situated actions and vocabularies of motive. *American Sociological Review*, 5(6), 904-913.
- Mollering, G. (2006). Trust, institutions, agency: towards a neo-institutional theory of trust, in *Handbook of Trust Research*, edited by R. Bachmann & A. Zaheer. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 355-376,
- Pipping, K. (1947/2008). *Infantry Company as a Society*. transl P. Kekale, Helsinki: Finnish National Defence University.
- Segal, D.R. (2001). Is a Peacekeeping Culture Emerging Among American Infantry in the Sinai MFO? *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 30(5), 607-636.
- Tortorello, F.J. (2010). *An ethnography of 'courage' among U.S. Marines*, PhD dissertation, Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois.
- Vidich, A.J. (1971). Participant Observation and the Collection and Interpretation of Data, in *Qualitative Methodology: First Hand Involvement with the Social World*, edited by W.J. Filstead. Chicago: Markham, 164-173.
- Wilson, T.P. (1974). Normative and Interpretive Paradigms in Sociology, in *Understanding Everyday Life*, edited by J.D. Douglas. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 57-79.