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Date deposited: 25 November 2009

Version of file: Author final

Peer Review Status: Peer Reviewed

Citation for published item:


Further information on publisher website:

http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/

Publishers copyright statement:

The definitive version of this article appeared in Journal of War and Culture Studies, 2009 2 pp 211 - 223

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Heroic anxieties: the figure of the British soldier in contemporary print media.

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Abstract
This paper is about representations of the figure of the British soldier in contemporary print media. Drawing on photographs reproduced across a range of newspapers over a specified time period in 2006, the paper examines the salient features of the construction of the figure of the soldier within this quantity and diversity of images. A key distinction in this group of images is that between the anonymous and the named soldier. The use of generic images of soldiers is discussed. The paper assesses the functions of these representations of the soldier in terms of the work that they do in consolidating specific narratives about armed conflict. The paper argues that contemporary print media representations of the figure of the British soldier reflect anxieties about armed violence, and its legitimacy or otherwise.

Keywords
Military; British soldier; print media; war photography; representation; violence.

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Introduction

Since the advent of photographic technologies in the mid-19th century, the medium has been used consistently to construct images of the figure of the soldier. Military activities and photography are, in many ways, mutually constitutive (Virilio, 1994; Trachtenberg, 1985; Diller and Scofidio, 1996), with military engagements and practices constituting an enduring photographic subject (Price, 2004). Despite the development of technologies and practices enabling the capture of moving images and their transmission via television, the construction and circulation of photographic stills remains a key part of the news coverage of war, and a primary site for the negotiation and articulation of civilian discourses seeking to ascribe meanings to soldiers and their activities. These discourses are specific to time and place in their detail and articulation, but refer back to wider historically-rooted narratives through which that figure is understood within national cultures. In this paper, we examine some current forms through which the figure of the soldier is represented. We argue that the figures circulating through images in print media reflect both contemporaneous and enduring anxieties about the use of armed violence, and its legitimacy or otherwise.

Print media photography and armed conflict

We start by contextualising this discussion of the figure of the soldier within debates about the role of photographic images within media representations of armed conflict. In his account of the media coverage of the Falklands War (1982), written a year after the event, Robert Harris (1983) argued that the immediacy of television rendered it increasingly important as means of communication of news and image, in contrast to
print-based news. However, over the quarter century since Harris’ observation, in a context which has seen a remarkable expansion in the role of televised news and the use of the moving image in reporting war, photographs embedded within printed text endure as a significant format for the making and circulation of images of armed conflict and the figure of the soldier.

Images of the soldier abound in print media. Aided by the development of digital techniques for the ready capture, transmission and printing of photographs, the manufacture and circulation of images of the soldier is commonplace and straightforward. Coupled with the development of electronic publishing, including the use of dual formats (web-based and print) for most major national newspapers, the use of photographic images continues as a means of news dissemination and illustration. The ubiquity of photographic images in an age of cheap, readily useable cameras and other equipment like mobile phones has expanded the expectations of news editors and newspaper readers alike as to the possibilities for the easy capture of photographs of events in conflict zones. The photographic practices of soldiers assist here too (Woodward et al, 2009). We have come to expect our news of armed conflicts to be illustrated.

Our desires for photographs to illustrate the reporting of war do not rest solely with the fact that we have (through technologies of reproduction) become habituated to them. As a rich and expansive literature on photography and war photography illustrates, the functional capacities of the photographic image for the communication of ideas about armed conflict are multiple. The power of specific images to transcend their origins and the banality of their repetition is particularly notable (Hariman and
Lucaites, 2007). For Hoskins (2005), the capacity of the still image to burn itself into the memory stands in contrast to the failure of television to produce lasting memories of war, a possible reflection of the banality of so much televisual imagery (Mirzoeff, 2005). Print media photographs, then, are a significant source of representations of military activities.

It is not sufficient, however, to consider visual representations of the figure of the soldier without also considering the context of their production. Images of soldiers do not just ‘appear’ in newspapers, and neither can they simply be ‘read’ in terms of their image content. Print media photographs of British soldiers have to be understood as a product of news media engagements with the practice of armed conflict. The complexities and nuances of media involvement in war are neatly categorised by Thussu and Freeman (2003), who identify three narratives around the roles performed by mainstream media. The first of these, the idea of news media as a critical observer performing a potentially adversarial role in the impartial and independent monitoring and recording of military events, whilst popular within many in the news media professions, has been subjected to extensive critique. The second narrative has at its core the observation that close, mutually dependent and mutually reinforcing connections between the media and the military cast the news media as publicist, rather than watchdog. Commentators point to a long history of co-operative engagement by journalists where the granting of close access to military operations through practices now termed ‘embedding’ has consequences for the reproduction by mainstream news media of the interpretative frameworks of political and military leaders. The third narrative extends this idea by pointing to the outcome of this convergence between military and media networks to the point where the media itself
constitutes the spaces in which armed conflicts are fought and many sectors of the population experience war – as spectators. The narrative of media as battleground views the media as a means by which contemporary conflicts are, quite literally, played out. This narrative is underpinned by arguments about a fundamental shift in the nature of armed conflict – Der Derian’s (2001) notion of virtuous war is significant here – and includes the idea of the mobilisation of the public as spectators as an integral part of modern conflict (Tumber and Palmer, 2004; Shapiro, 2007). What is important to note here is the argument proposed by Campbell and Shapiro, who remind us of the need to consider not just the ways in which visual images are implicated within military strategies, which will include strategies for public mobilisation, but to consider also the critical practices around these strategies (Campbell and Shapiro, 2007). As we go on to argue, the constant and continual working-through of ideas and anxieties about violence and its legitimacy, a function of the photographs which we consider in this paper, is a function of the position of these photographs as a site where conflicts are played out.

As well as taking into the account the wider narratives around the production of photographic images of soldiers, we also need to consider the practicalities and processes of production at a more individual (or even mundane) scale which result in representations of the figure of the soldier. We have already touched on a couple of these production issues, such as the presence of photographers in proximity to military actions capable of taking specific types of photographs, and the utility of contemporary photographic technologies for the ready capture, transmission and reproduction of images for observers and for participants. Significant too are the organisational structures for the production of professional quality images by press
agencies, staff photographers and freelancers. There are issues surrounding the micro-practices of reproduction within print media formats, whether print or electronic, which include the positioning, manipulation (e.g. cropping) and contextualising of photographs with reference to headlines, captions and narrative texts, all of which give meaning to images. There is also the issue of the selection of images on grounds of taste; British print media is reluctant to show explicit images of death and the effects of violence on the human body (for further discussion, see Campbell, 2004). Poole’s arguments about visual economies is helpful here in framing understanding of the multiple factors that shape production (Poole, 1997). The components of a visual economy – the organisation of production, the circulation of images and image objects, and the cultural and discursive systems through which images are appraised, interpreted and given worth – all necessarily need accounting for in order to reach an understanding of how images work. From her ideas about the visual economy, we take forward the idea that production processes, often quite prosaic or incidental, are as necessary a component of the context in which the figure of the soldier is reproduced as the content of the image itself.

**Looking at print media photographs of British soldiers**

In this paper, then, we look at print media representations of British soldiers, in order to understand how the figure of the soldier is portrayed and the implications of those portrayals. The arguments that follow draw on materials collected as part of a larger research project on the negotiation of identity and representation of the British armed forces (see Jenkings et al, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Woodward et al, 2009, and 2010). The phase of the project looking at print media representations required weekly
searches of the websites of daily national newspapers (Guardian, Independent, Times, Daily Telegraph, Scotsman, Mirror, Sun, Daily Mail, Daily Express) and Sunday sister papers (Independent on Sunday, Sunday Telegraph, Observer, News of the World, Sunday Mirror, Sunday Times, Scotland on Sunday) for the period 1st February to 31st August 2006. This was combined with more focused searches of print editions of these newspapers around particular events (such as Veteran’s Day in June 2006) or following particular stories. The intention of these searches was to capture and collect examples from any news story or article in which members of the British armed forces were represented photographically in some way during a specified period of time. In addition, and outside that timeframe, we also drew on existing paper archives collected by members of the research team over the preceding three to four years. These additional sources focused primarily on gender issues, debates about diversity and difference within the armed forces, and media discourses on civil-military relations. Some of these examples are included here in order to expand on the analysis that we present.

Each data item that was collected, usually a photograph and accompanying text, was captured and stored in digital format (by scanning from print or copying from web pages), with over 950 stories collected in this way. The images and accompanying stories covered a great diversity of events and issues, from reports on operations in theatre to accounts of the activities of personnel and their families at home, and the photographs used to illustrate these varied accordingly, from troops embarking on Chinooks to cropped close-ups of regimental insignia on a uniform. All the stories were coded according to the visual content in the photograph accompanying each story. Our coding scheme had three broad categories: ‘soldiers’, ‘material objects’,
and ‘other general military’. It is the category of photographs featuring the figure of the soldier that we draw on primarily here. This category was then broken down into a further 16 sub-categories (embarkation/disembarkation of troops; armed contact; patrolling; on parade; personal celebration; close-up headshots; disabled soldiers; dead soldier; abusive soldier; bad soldier; hearts and minds; with politician; royalty; recognised hero; prisoner; special forces). Each story and photograph was then assigned to one or more of these categories. Coding in this way made clear both how similar photographs could be used in very different ways, and conversely how very different photographs could be used to illustrate similar stories. We take from this observation a point informing the analysis which follows, about the instability of the image alone; the coding exercise reinforced for us a widely-shared observation about the use of photographic images, which is that the social and material contexts of images are central to their analysis.

We should state briefly what we did not do. This exercise in collection, collation and coding was not intended as a comprehensive overview of all print media photographs reproduced for publication during the period of study. We did not, for example, collect examples from regional newspapers (although, being based in the traditional military recruiting grounds of North East England, our regional daily, The Journal, regularly reproduced images in stories featuring personnel from the area). Furthermore, we did not have the resources to conduct a systematic check of all print editions of newspapers for comparison with web versions of the same story and paper, although we were alert to the fact that sometimes there were differences over and above the obvious variation between these formats in terms of how the reader approaches, and is offered for reading, electronic and print stories. In addition, there
were limits to many web-based and CD-ROM archives of newspapers for an analysis of this kind; these archives frequently remove images from stories in order to reduce file size. (This in turn creates potential problems for future studies of news images using digital archive sources.) Our point here is that the dataset of stories which we constructed was drawn from data sources that themselves are highly mediated in ways that go beyond the manipulations around production that we have already discussed. That said, analysis of this dataset indicated a consistency through the materials which give us a high degree of confidence in the analysis we propose here.

**The anonymous soldier**

When reviewing the collection of stories and these hundreds of pictures of British soldiers, time and again the analysis highlighted a basic distinction applicable across the dataset, between the figure of the un-named or anonymous soldier and that of the soldier as a named individual. This distinction is very simple, between those representations where the soldier is given anonymity in image, caption or text (even though his or her features may be clearly recognisable) and representations of a soldier who is named by the caption to the photograph (and, more frequently than not, in the text of the story itself). We suggest that there is something going on here beyond the practice of inscription of a name by a photograph; these two types of photographs deal with armed conflict in rather different ways, and serve very different purposes.

The photographs featuring un-named, anonymous soldiers are, quite simply, ubiquitous. They show soldiers during operations, or battle-ready, or in various
stages of preparation. Soldiers appear singly or in groups, and wearing helmets and body armour, or berets and uniform. Most usually carry weapons and most usually are depicted in postures suggestive of action. A particularly dominant image, in terms of the quantity of examples, is that of the soldier with weapon raised, looking down the sights of a rifle. The locations of this action vary from foot and vehicle patrols in built up areas to shots of soldiers taking cover around banks, ditches, buildings, or the remains of buildings. Occasionally such photographs appear posed, but more usually they have the look of a snap framed in the moment.

Our first example\(^2\) shows three vehicles parked at various angles to the viewer ranged in a row across the picture. The scene is set against a blue sky and grey smoke, and a fire, possibly the source of the smoke, is visibly orange in the far left of the picture. The outline of a rocky mountain range is visible in the far distance, and apart from a belt of trees in the middle distance the ground is dry, stony and unvegetated. Five figures in desert-coloured military uniforms are identifiable in the photograph; four are positioned around the vehicles and have their backs turned, and the fifth is located in front of a wall and faces the camera on the right of the picture. One of the figures, judging by position of his legs, is moving towards the vehicles and away from the camera.\(^3\) This image appeared in the *Guardian* newspaper on 3\(^{rd}\) July 2006, in two different stories under different by-lines in the print and on-line editions, and was headlined variously as ‘Generals think again in Taliban onslaught’ and ‘Britain plans extra troops to fight Taliban’. The captions for both photographs are the same: ‘Soldiers of 3 Para in a six-hour firefight near Nazwad, southern Afghanistan, which left 21 militants dead’. The photograph is credited to AFP. The same photograph was printed in the *Scotsman* newspaper of the same day with the headline ‘Two
soldiers die as Taleban step up attacks’. It is captioned ‘Troops from 3 Para engaged in a firefight while on patrol. Despite claims the British are in Helmand to carry out 'hearts and minds' operations among the population, they find themselves under constant attack’. It is credited to Getty Images.

The most notable feature of this photograph is its quality and utility as a generic image of contemporary warfare. Compositionally, it conforms to a standard classic format for landscape photography; the figures of the soldiers are almost incidental to the photograph, and the image is dominated by the strong horizontal lines of sky, mountains and trees, and the textural contrasts between smoky sky, stony ground and military metal. There is nothing in the picture to indicate where the photograph was taken, and nothing to identify the soldiers other than just as soldiers; the captions do this work. The meanings carried by the figures of the soldier represented in this image are of anonymous and unidentifiable participants in war. Their size relative to the scale of the landscape casts them as footsoldiers (despite the presence of the vehicles), and the geophysical features of the landscape casts it as specifically desert terrain and not of the British Isles. The landscape is simultaneously benign, on account of the aesthetic qualities of the composition, and threatening, on account of the fire and smoke that the image captures. As a generic photograph, then, this image works well as an representation of nameless place for the conduct of foreign war, and as an ambiguous representation of the act of soldiering. There are no firm indications with the image itself as to the activities these soldiers may be engaged in. Indeed, the idea suggested by the captions is of potentially vulnerable personnel.

This vulnerability to violence occurs frequently across the collection of images. A second example shows five figures spaced around the edges of a doorway set into the
wall of what appears to be a compound – a corner of sky is just visible in the top right of the photograph. Bright sunlight streams through a doorway. Three armed soldiers are intent on what is going on outside the doorway and seem poised and ready to move. A fourth soldier, facing the viewer and to the right of the trio, is looking down, his attention on an object in his hands. A fifth, furthest right, is facing in the opposite direction from the others and away from the viewer. This photograph was printed on 14th September 2006 in the Sun, under the headline ‘Heroes are holding the line’. It was captioned ‘Dangerous war, troops in Afghanistan’, and no picture credit was given. A cropped version of this photograph appeared on 31st August 2006 in the Scotsman under the headline ‘Afghan danger deliberately played down, official claims’. It is captioned ‘Soldiers from 3 Para have faced almost constant attack on patrol and against their compounds in Helmand’ and is credited to Rob Knight/PA.

The cropped version shows just the three soldiers to the right of the picture, and the object of focus of the soldier furthest to the left in this group of three is not visible; the doorway and its light effects has been removed.

As with the first example, this photograph has generic qualities that explain its use by both publications for stories with rather different emphases. It is a photograph of a type that figures regularly across newspapers; there is no indication within the photograph to tie the event it depicts to any specific point in space or time, beyond the textures and colours of the building materials and ground which are suggestive of a battlezone in an arid region. It is a strong image, compositionally, with its contrasts of light and shade and of the textures of the figures and structure in which they shelter. The function of the photograph seems to be purely to indicate soldiers, engaged in armed conflict, in locations that are clearly distant to the viewer. There is, however, a further notable feature of this photograph, which follows from the
positioning of the figures; sheltering behind the wall and around the perimeter of the
door, they are portrayed as vulnerable within potentially hostile territory. In the
cropped version, that vulnerability is granted by the stance of the trio, looking intently
in three directions with weapons raised; the cropping here emphasizes the iconic
qualities of the photograph depicting soldiers under attack. Yet this remains a generic
picture; Shapiro discusses a very similar image of a US soldier in Afghanistan,
remarking that ‘the history to which this photo contributes is a history of vulnerable
bodies seeking temporary refuge and a place for safe observation in hostile
landscapes’ (Shapiro 2007: 293). The idea of the vulnerability of the soldiers,
evident in the British example by the suggestion of an unseen enemy in the glaring
white sunlight seen through the door, is aided, of course, by the captions. For the Sun,
the very act of soldiering is deemed heroic. We should note here the difference in
tone between the two narratives which frame the same photograph. Clearly, the Sun
engages with a populist discourse on military heroism. In this and other examples,
there is an expected diversity in terms of the political agendas of the various
newspapers which use these photographs. The use of generic photographs, however,
makes the distinctions between those political agendas less clear-cut.

These generic photographs of soldiers are instructive because they show so clearly the
disjuncture between the image and its textual framing. One such generic is that of the
silhouetted figure of the soldier, dark against a lighter background. As Roderick
(2009) notes, writing about the use of the silhouette of the soldier in military
advertisements, the silhouette draws upon a ‘long-standing and well-established visual
convention of treating the human shadow as a virtual “index” for the inner qualities or
essence of the individual’ (Roderick 2009: 81). Most commonly, the silhouetted
soldier makes visual reference to heroic survival at the end of battle. One example,
showing five silhouetted armed soldiers against a setting sun appears in six different news stories (Guardian 4th July, 31st July, 10th August and 14th September; Times 19th May; Scotsman 2nd August, all 2006). The stories are about, respectively, a review of troop numbers in Afghanistan, a change of command at ISAF, a senior commander’s comments on the nature of the engagement in Afghanistan; the dispatch of Polish troops to Afghanistan; the nature of the enemy’s fighting style; and four fatalities in Afghanistan and Iraq. Only the 4th July Guardian and 2nd August Scotsman use an uncropped version of the photograph. One image, then, serves multiple purposes within the reporting of this war.

Generic photographs, in general terms, succeed if they are useable in a variety of contexts. They need to be of high technical and aesthetic quality, and low specific indexicality for that to be possible. Their function, though, is to homogenize conflict. They smooth out the complexities of the conflicts they purport to represent, and the ambiguities and problematics within the moral frameworks that the stories they illustrate purport to engage with. The figure of the soldier, reduced to its essence by the use of the silhouette, is suggestive of several ideas. First, as Machin (2004) suggests in his study of the image databases that large picture agencies construct, generic images encourage a specific image repertoire around particular ideas. In the case of these photographs of conflict, the war in Afghanistan in these images becomes bloodless; there is an utter ambiguity about the silhouetted figure. Second, these silhouettes render this particular conflict timeless; all references the specifics of time and place are removed. Consider the long conventions of the use of the soldier silhouette, and the reference points to other past wars that this particular image invokes. This would confirm Zelizer’s arguments about the ways in which news photography constructs highly conventionalized myths of war that refer back to other
times (Zelizer, 2004). Third, the figure of the soldier is utterly depersonalized, simply unrecognizable as an individual and with all possibility of recognition removed. The priorities and anxieties of the newspaper using the photograph can readily be framed around this image. For the Times, this image was all about the vulnerability of the troops, indicated by the anxieties of the headline: ‘Hunters may become the hunted in Taleban’s venomous heartland’, and the caption notes how ‘A few thousand British troops are based in an area four times the size of Wales’. The heroic position of the soldier is maintained by the image, but the legitimacy or otherwise of the armed violence they are called on to perform is squeezed out from the frame by this universalized, anonymous, heroic figure.

The named soldier

We turn now to those photographs of soldiers where the individual shown is named. These photographs are distinct both because of the act of naming and because of the type of photograph used. The figure of the soldier portrayed in photographs where that soldier is named is still articulated around the idea of the hero. What is significant for these images is how the representation of these figures as heroes is mediated through a set of contemporary anxieties about legitimate and illegitimate violence.

Images of named soldiers occur most frequently when those soldiers have died. In our collection of images, these photographs abound. In reporting a fatality and its aftermath, a fairly standard convention is show an image of the deceased once next of kin have sanctioned the publication of the name. With this comes the release of a photograph. The type of photograph used varies according to source, and these
memorialising photographs range from what might be assumed to be official, formal pictures taken of a soldier in smart dress uniform, to snapshots of the individual either in or out of uniform which could be assumed to have originated with the bereaved family or friends. Almost invariably, these photographs have been cropped from an original, so that the face of the deceased dominates the image. These images are contextualised with references to the character, qualities and abilities of the deceased as a soldier and as a person.

The subject position of hero is invariably ascribed to these individuals who have died on active service, through quotations in the text and the textual narratives themselves, and through the captions to the photographs. Again, there are nuances between newspapers, reflecting different political agendas, and yet a commonality of ascription across the dataset. The photographic images may not in themselves be suggestive of this, but in their framing and contextualising, this position is automatically granted. The idea of heroism seems to be the only idea around which these images of young, fit, now absent individuals can circulate. This raises an interesting question about the consequences of this ascription. Writing at the end of the First World War, Herman Hesse had the following observation to make about the ubiquity of the notion of the heroic soldier:

…it is an abuse of language to say – as is now fashionable, especially among stay-at-homes – that our poor soldiers, slaughtered at the front, died a ‘heroic death’. That is sentimentality. Of course the soldiers who died in the war are worthy of our deepest sympathy. Many of them did great things and suffered greatly, and in the end paid with their lives. But that does not make them
‘heroes’. The common soldier, at whom an officer bellows as he would at a dog, is not suddenly transformed into a hero by the bullet that kills him. To suppose that there can be millions of ‘heroes’ is in itself an absurdity. (Hesse 1985 / 1919: 73)

If this practice can be thought of as absurd and sentimental, then what does this imply about contemporary representations of the figure of the soldier? The persistence of the idea of the soldier as essentially heroic suggests a need to give meaning to loss. In the context of these particular fatalities, we would argue that the need for the ascription of meaning reflects anxieties about the legitimacy of the conflicts in which they occurred.

Our image collection produced quantities of photographs of flag-draped coffins carried from the back of transport planes by uniformed pallbearers. Unlike in the United States, there has been little anxiety within the British print media about publishing photographs of ceremonies for the repatriation of the remains of the deceased. The fatalities of armed violence are readily displayed, necessarily in an image that is subject to the conventions of print media which strictly circumscribe how these losses can be represented. These images of flag-draped coffins, though, are ambiguous. They may simultaneously be the only mechanism by which the loss of life from an unpopular war might be noted, the only way that concerns about the consequences of armed violence can be expressed. Alternatively, they homogenise individual losses, sweeping up all military deaths in a bundle which is indicated as heroic through the protocols of repatriation and confirmed as such by the publication of a photograph of the repatriation event. The troubling ambiguities of lethal violence
are, once more, squeezed from the frames of these endlessly similar, individual events.

Anxieties about violence, and about how the victims of that violence can and cannot be depicted, surrounds another category of named soldiers, those who have been injured. The figure of the wounded soldier is relatively rare in terms of the quantity of images of soldiers, reflecting anxieties around the depiction of injury and disfigurement. Some injuries cannot be shown, of course; Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is marked by its absence of visuality so, for example, a *Scotland on Sunday* article on 12th March 2006 illustrated a story headlined ‘Scottish veterans of the Iraq war are suffering a Vietnam effect’ (a reference to PTSD) with a generic press agency photograph of troops with a helicopter in an unidentifiable place. Where images of soldiers with visible injuries are shown, they invariably show transcendence of disabling injury. This is done either through images where physical injury is not apparent, or through images where the injured individual is shown tackling the tasks in daily life despite the damage to their physical body. There is an ambiguity, inevitably, with these images. An example, printed in the *Scotsman* of 15th November 2004, shows a uniformed male soldier sitting in the back of an armoured vehicle, tying up his bootlace. Close inspection of the image reveals that his right leg is prosthetic. The story around this image has nothing to do with this individual personally, or his injury, but concerns regimental reorganisation of the Black Watch, the soldier’s regiment.

This image, though, is rare. The stories and images of injured soldiers rarely figure in our collection, with the exception of two narratives. The first is that where injured
soldiers have been awarded medals. In these, the hero position is readily ascribed, confirmed by the award of military honours for the act which usually resulted in the injury. The second is that where a wounded hero has faced difficulties around their rehabilitation. A number of stories have emerged which focus on the problems a soldier has faced – beyond his or her disablement – in adjustment to life after active service. Often these highlight the inadequacies of health care and social support, and the figure of the soldier represented here carries echoes of the long-standing idea of the forgotten or discarded hero. With these exceptions, the injured soldier is largely absent, lending weight to arguments circulating within debates about civil-military relations reflecting anxieties about a purported disintegration of the military covenant at the present time in the UK. Chris Hedges, writing about the absence of representations in visual culture of the victims of armed conflict, suggests why this is so:

War is always about betrayal. It is about the betrayal of the young by the old, idealists by cynics and finally soldiers by politicians. Those who pay the price, those who are maimed forever by war, are shunted aside, crumbled up and thrown away. They are war’s refuse. We do not see them. We do not hear them. They are doomed, like wandering spirits, to float around the edges of our consciousness, ignored, even reviled. The message they bring is too painful for us to hear. We prefer the myth of war, the myth of glory, honor, patriotism and heroism, words that in the terror and brutality of combat are empty and meaningless. (Hedges 2004: 11)
Along with the dead and the injured, the other sub-category of named soldiers in photographic images are errant soldiers, soldiers gone bad, soldiers who have been found to have transgressed military codes of conduct. They are named and shamed. Within this category of images, what is notable is the function of naming an identifiable individual. By illustrating the story with a named identifiable individual (rather than a generic, soldier-on-operations picture), the story is contained. Wider anxieties about militarised violence and its brutalising effects on those trained to deploy armed force are left hanging, or sidestepped, or squeezed from the interpretative frame in which these stories could potentially sit. The textual framing of such stories invariably focuses on the individual, whose behaviour is frequently ascribed to personal pathology. Wider questions about the cultures of violence which may condone or aim to control violence are ignored, and questions of violence that the issue of soldier as abuser raises are reflected back onto the errant individual rather than the military body as a whole. This idea is extended to stories of errant individuals whose military past – which may have nothing to do with their position as errant – is conjured up through images which show the individual in past times, dressed as a soldier.

**Afterword**

That the figure of the British soldier in contemporary British print media is represented in ways that are suggestive of the heroic is in itself unsurprising. What is notable about these contemporary figures are the ways in which the hero position ascribed to the soldier is rearticulated in the present time to reflect current anxieties about the use of violence, particularly its legitimacy or otherwise. If we view
contemporary media engagement with armed forces as implicated directly within the
cconduct of our present conflicts – if the media is part of the contemporary
battleground – then our analysis suggests that the inscription of meaning onto the
figure of the soldier constitutes a part of that battleground.

One conclusion which follows from this concerns the necessity of being alert, as
Campbell (2004) puts it, to both the rhetorical capacity of media images and to their
distributive capacity. We have touched upon the idea that a visual economy exists
within which these images of the figure of the soldier can be viewed. The
representations that proliferate through print media cannot be read purely in terms of
the content of the image itself, but have to be understood in terms of the range of
processes of production and circulation that enable these images to be seen. The
visual content of individual images, then, is only part of the story.

A second point follows from this, concerning the necessity of considering not only the
figures which appear, but also those which do not. In the process of production and
circulation of images, restrictions emerge as to what can and cannot be shown. Those
photographs that we see – the images that get viewed by the civilian public – shape
the possibilities for our responses to the conflicts they represent. These images may
well be implicated within military strategies but, as Campbell and Shapiro suggest
(2007), the act of viewing can also enable the development of critical practices around
these strategies. The photograph of the soldier is never just a photograph of a soldier.
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1 ESRC grant reference: RES-000-23-0992, ‘Negotiating identity and representation in the mediated armed forces’.

2 Due to the costs associated with the reproduction of copyrighted images, we are unable to reproduce the examples directly. Web links are provided to direct the reader to the original source. For this image see:
http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/jul/03/military.topstories3  Accessed 24 April 2009

3 The caption indicates that as members of the Parachute Regiment, the soldiers depicted are male. We do not include in our analysis here a discussion of the gendered nature of the representations of the soldiers shown, but for a discussion of the masculinities and femininities associated with print media representations of the figure of the British soldier, see Woodward and Winter (2007) and Basham (2008).


6 Such images also have purchase in other cultural forms; see Steve McQueen’s Queen and County, an installation engaging with the images of deceased soldiers as facsimile postage stamps, and Morgan Matthews’ documentary film The Fallen.