Mogan Hunts and Pig Nights: Military Masculinities and the Making of the Arms-Corps Soldier

Ben Wadham
School of Education, Flinders University
ben.wadham@flinders.edu.au

Abstract: The question of institutional bad behaviour, violence and abuse is apparent in contemporary Australia. In the past decade we have heard numerous stories of bastardisation and sexual harassment in the armed services filtering through the nation’s media. This has culminated most recently in the torture of kittens by Australian soldiers in Townsville and the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by United States soldiers in the Abu Ghraib military prison. Are such institutional practices an aberration as many would have us believe or are they structured: an inherent element of institutional masculine culture? In this paper I draw upon my own experiences as an Infantry Soldier in 2/4 Royal Australian regiment from 1988-1990. Using the masculinities literature and critical sociological understandings of institutions, identity and power I outline the rite of passage that recruits undergo to become soldiers. I argue that this process, scaffolded by the ideology of mateship, and the establishment of a ‘brotherhood’, distances arms-soldiers from respecting community accepted lines of responsibility. The violence of institutional men is therefore an inherent part of military culture and a persistent concern for the broader community.

In the past decade we have heard numerous stories of bastardisation and sexual harassment in the armed services filtering through the nation’s media. This has culminated most recently in the torture of kittens by Australian soldiers in Townsville and the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by United States soldiers in the Abu Ghraib military prison. Are such institutional practices an aberration as many would have us believe or are they structured: an inherent element of institutional masculine culture?

In this paper I will consider the masculinist culture of the arms-corps soldier. I hope to begin to illuminate some of the key considerations when thinking about men, masculinity and institutional violence. My primary concern revolves around the question of how an
Army, in a contemporary liberal democracy, can create a killer - a professional soldier with the capacity and willingness to take another human’s life - but still keep its personnel behaving in line with community standards. In the broader sense, how can an Army fight for the supposedly universal values of justice, respect and democracy when it trains and supports groups of men who, I will argue, are a threat to the safety of others, namely women, children and other men in their own broader community?

In exploring these issues I will draw upon my own experiences as an Infantry Soldier with the Operational Deployment Force, 2/4 Royal Australian Regiment, in Townsville Lavarack Barracks during the period 1988-1990. I will begin by outlining the phenomenon of men’s violence and military culture within the context of the literature on masculinities and through my own experiences. I will draw on the sociological concepts of the ‘total institution’ and the right of passage to help articulate the character and process of military training. This will also involve the question of mateship and the development of a ‘brotherhood’ or masculinist fraternity through which acts of depravity and abuse can occur.

My key argument is that the ‘bad behaviour’ of institutional masculinities is not idiosyncratic but a structured element of institutional practice. The soldiers of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, or the misogyny of the infantry battalion, are not aberrations; they are structured and culturally prescribed. Indeed, the relational dynamics of institutions like the Army, whose primary task is to create soldiers, prepared to kill, dominate and control ‘the enemy’, inevitably create the possibilities, or even likelihood, of these
‘aberrations’. While many soldiers embody and reflect the much vaunted public spirit of the Australian Army, the conditions of training and of arms-corps culture work to generate a soldier subjectivity that is anathema to the preferred image of the Australian Army and which poses an inherent potential threat to the safety of the broader community.

**Military Masculinities: Men and Violence**

In many societies throughout history there has been an intimate relationship between social power, masculinity and the military. This continues to be the case in modern, western, democratic societies. Lee and Daly, for example, argue that:

> Male domination is one part of a complex of power relations fundamental to the maintenance of a class society; the other two parts are social inequality and militarism (1987:34).

In order to make sense of the connections between men, masculinity, violence and institutions such as the army, it is worth referring to several key themes emerging from recent research into masculinities. In particular, it is important to recognise that masculinity is socially produced and represented, consumed and, regulated and it is an ideal through which people identify and act. Therefore, there are multiple masculinities within society as a whole, and within the Army specifically. In addition, the representation of masculinities, more specifically military masculinities, changes over time; sometimes celebrated (Gallipoli) and sometimes maligned (Vietnam). Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant expression and form of masculinity, against which all other forms of masculinity, indeed humanity are compared and contrasted (Connell, 1995: 76-81, Agostino, 1997:16). Military masculinities are expressions of hegemonic masculinity,
and in Australia hegemonic masculinity generally is marked by the capacity to engage in aggressive, controlling, violent, authoritarian and self-referential practices.

In this context it is important to recognise that violence is a preponderantly male practice. It is after all men, and groups of men, who predominantly engage in practices of degradation and violent exploitation of others. In Australia most sexual assaults, armed robberies, assaults and domestic violence are perpetrated by men, and in 1999, 94% of prison inmates were male (Connell: 2000: 213). At the same time, it is predominantly men who are the soldiers of the world’s armies. According to the 2003 ADF Census, 90 per cent of Australian Army members are men (http://www.defence.gov.au/dpe/defencecensus2003/fact_sheets/fact_sheet_02.pdf) Men are almost exclusively in positions of command during wars, and it is primarily men who are the political leaders making the decisions to violate other nations and their peoples.

Just as there are multiple masculinities within any culture, there are also competing representations of these masculinities. This is clearly evident in the headline grabbing news stories of the past year (2003-4). The heroic image of the elite footballer has sat uncomfortably with stories of individual and group rape, and the wholesome Aussie peacekeeper of East Timor fame has had to share the limelight with stories of SAS soldiers taking trophy photos with dead militia soldiers and the degradation of corpses. A Senate Inquiry into military bastardisation and reports of soldiers in Lavarack Barracks, Townsville, torturing kittens, are also fresh in the public mind. Yet, in the Australian imagination, the reputation of the Aussie soldier remains almost inviolable. When news
of the torture at Abu Ghraib by American soldiers of Iraqi prisoners emerged, there was little connection made with the Australian military and its history of abuse stories.

Just as recent research suggests that male violence is an inherent aspect of particular dominant masculinities and not the aberration most would like to believe, so I believe that the socially unacceptable practices mentioned above are themselves inherent aspects of dominant military masculinities. In exploring this further, I will focus upon the arm-corps or warrior masculinity which Lt Col Phelps of the Royal Australian Artillery Corps argues is a basic tenet of the Australian Army (1997: 38-39).

Camp Kapooka: The Making of a Soldier

“Soldiers are not born but made.” asserts Rachel Woodward (2000: 640) writing on warrior masculinities, and this is also true of masculinities generally. As Norman Mailer, in Cannibals and Christians, writes:

Mascullity is not something given to you, something you are born with, but something you gain, and you gain it by winning small battles with honor. (1966:23)

If this is true, it is important to ask the question, how is this soldier constructed, what are the ideals, technologies, problems or rationalities that are used to discipline him? Klaus Theweleit, writing a psychoanalytic account of soldiering and masculinity asks:

By what means is a young boy made a soldier? How does he become... a stereometric figure? How does the body armour attain its final form, what are its functions...how does the “whole” man who wears it function - and above all – what is the nature of his ego? (Theweleit, 1989: 143)
The ‘stereometric’ figure alludes to the ‘man’ who is self-reliant, who is stoic and strong, but who is also detached from others, and untouched by the vulnerabilities that make the rest of us human. Foucault (1976: 142) describes this body and is subject as a docile body; regulated, moulded and transformed into an agent of institutional will.

This dominant image of the ‘warrior soldier’, to which every young recruit is expected to aspire, is spelt out by Woodward:

The warrior hero is physically fit and powerful. He is mentally strong and unemotional. He is capable of both solitary, individual pursuit of goals and self-denying contribution towards the work of the team. He is also bit of a hero with the knack for picking up girls and is resolutely heterosexual. He is brave, adventurous, and prepared to take risks (2000:643).

In the Australian context, the military subject is made in the image of the Australian Digger, which historically involves images of amiable larrikinism, and independent anti-authoritarianism, but which remains fundamentally reliable and wholesome. Yet beneath the veneer, the subject is highly regimented and institutionalised through the discourses and practices of hegemonic masculinity.

There is considerable physical, psychological and ideological work that goes into producing the Australian soldier. In order to understand how this takes place, the work of Goffman on ‘the total institution’ and Van Gennep (1960) on ‘the rite de passage’ is particularly helpful.

Erving Goffman (1971) describes the asylum, the orphanage, the monastery or the army barracks as total institutions; institutions where the subjects’ every movement, every
choice, is consumed by institutional objectives and influence. The Army barracks is a
total institution: new recruits are interned, volunteering their lives and their agency to the
nation and its defence force. Life within the total institution is an all-consuming,
timetabled, intensely scrutinised and regulated existence. This regulation is not simply of
the body and the mind, but of the culture of the soldier’s life.

Van Gennep’s (1960) notion of the rite de passage is particularly relevant to the military
institution. He describes three main phases: separation, margin (or limen) and
aggregation. In the case of the military recruit, he is separated from his previous
homeworld, his time at the training establishment is liminal – between identities – until
he ‘marches out’ – when he is aggregated – and moves beyond the bottom of the
hierarchy and joins with the wider military community. This process is deployed through
a number of military strategies: a process of separation, that is, isolation from the
homeworld; a process of mortification of the self, where the civilian is destroyed and
remade as soldier, where the boy is left behind to make way for the man; and a process of
elevation of the principal authority, where the civilian is socialised in direct relation to
the ideal of the Australian Digger – a white, masculinist ideal (see Pettman, 1992).

The making of the soldier in relation to this ideal has explicit implications for soldier
training. Discourses of the Australian soldier rely heavily upon race, gender and sexuality
to establish an identity that is discretely white, male and straight (see Hockey, 2003;
Agostino 1997; Woodward, 2003). In Australian culture at large, the warrior myth
remains strong, as demonstrated by the success of Australian war movies (ie Breaker
Morant, Gallipoli), the omnipresence of statues, old artillery and anti-aircraft guns in
parks, and the preoccupation with memorials, wreath-laying and national events like
ANZAC day (see Howe, 1995; Damousi & Lake, 1995). Thus, when new recruits come
to Kapooka, or Duntroon, the two key military training establishments in Australia, they
are already imbued with a variety of military ideals, beliefs and interests. These ideals
may or may not fit with the military culture into which they are required to fit
themselves. Let me explain my own experience of the processes experienced by a recruit.

Enlistment involved swearing allegiance to the nation and upon completion one was now
the property of the nation through the authority of the Australian Army. This is the first
separation. On my overnight train and bus trip to Kapooka via Melbourne I was
accompanied by a number of other recruits and serving Corporal. I chose to wear what I
would always wear in civilian life, which included a purple paisley shirt. This became the
subject of a number of lines of abuse over the course of the trip “Hey Wadham that shirt
made out of your mum’s curtains, what, you a poofter or something?” This was a process
of ongoing separation. This line of abuse became a staple of military life. Rituals of
degradation and abasement worked to destroy any sense of individuality, to separate
recruits from their previous life through references to effeminacy, homosexuality and
ineffectiveness.

Upon arrival at the 1st Recruit training Battalion the processes of subjectification and
discipline begin immediately. Your hair is shaved off, you are forced to get up early
eyery morning, all your personal items are taken away from you, you are given a new
wardrobe of various forms of dress, and you take up residence in institutional accommodation, in a room with four strangers, and ordered to regiment your bed, desk and wardrobe. It is a requirement to make your ‘socks smile’; your shirts ‘stand up by themselves’ and your brass shine.

Institutionalisation is facilitated by the removal of your name. You are given a number, and the name “recruit”. When I first arrived a Corporal said to me, in front of my 30 new colleagues, “what’s your name recruit?” I replied innocently “Ben Wadham”. The Corporal raised his voice and asked again, “No, recruit, what’s your name?” I replied “Ben”, and the Corporal raised his voice even more, making me a public spectacle for all. “You bloody idiot Recruit, your name is Recruit… forget your name; now you belong to me”. This process was degrading and disorientating; it worked to separate me from my past, my earlier sense of self. The past becomes a form a capital that is used as leverage to manipulate and segregate the new soldier whilst at the same time offering him a new way of being, of being an ‘amazing Australian soldier’ and a ‘potent weapon’.

This rebuilding of the self is physical, cultural and emotional. Rituals of degradation are important here also. Through the activities of forced marches, drill, circuit training, bayonet training, road runs and assault courses the soldier is drilled to be fit and effective and when he doesn’t meet the standard he is by implication feminine, weak and incompetent. As Hockey explains: “a kind of stoicism is engendered through an acceptance of particular kinds of suffering caused by physical exertion, lack of sleep and exposure to climatic variation” (2003:16-17). Failure to meet the required standards in
the activities is met by ridicule and abasement through reference to sexuality and gender. Failure is often referred to as representing 'hormone problems', being girls, acting like a bunch of wusses, or being a 'front-bum'. These abasements are used, sometimes regardless of performance, to keep the recruit on edge, to keep him striving toward the masculinist ideal of the digger.

The potency of the recruit is conflated with the potency of the group; expressed through a discourse of mateship. This is structured through the building of a relationship between sexuality and potency, between the recruit's penis and his gun. Women are central to this construction of potency. As a young recruit I was taught the saying “this is my weapon this is my gun, this is for shooting, this is for fun”. We were taught to treat the gun as an appendage and as a very sacred one - just as sacred as our penis. There was lots of emphasis on both. Potency and masculinity were inextricably linked, the capacity to both kill and prey upon women - the ability to perform - was paramount. There was a constant emphasis on making the weapon part of oneself. It was about building you up to be an invulnerable killing machine. Army folklore revolved around what you could do with your gun, and your ability to give people a “third eye” was popular in Army argot. At the same time, there were myths and stories about what men had done in terms of sexual activities to women (see Flood, 2003), which the new recruit took with him and his mates to town on recreational leave: a sense of tradition.

**Mateship and the Brotherhood**

Through the discourse of mateship your fellow recruits become your family.
The Australian notion of mateship, the ideal of 'mate masculinity', a bond among men that exudes from the romanticisation of Gallipoli, is an effect of this tension. A mate is an individual at heart who foregoes his individualism for the greater authority of his mates. Mateship is established upon a notion of sacrifice. The overriding commitment to other men, that brotherhood, legitimates the death of Australian soldiers as a sacrifice to the higher authority of mateship and the nation.

However, as Pease (2001: 195) notes, Australian mateship is constructed against the image of 'others' who are different. Thus, women, gay men and lesbian women, effeminate men, Indigenous Australians and the potential enemy – the Indonesian, the Arab or the Asian – are constantly referred to in derogatory and insulting ways. The mateship subjectivity accepts anyone until they affront the brotherhood and what it stands for. McLean argues that Mateship is an inherently fragile construct: "This kind of male friendship, however, is extremely fragile. If unspoken limits are transgressed or rules broken, then the full fury of male condemnation rapidly descends upon the head of the guilty party. The end result is a deep seated fear of difference." (McLean 2004: xii). The social environment of arms-corps masculinity was always deeply competitive, always threatening, and revolved upon the subversion of the Other as an instrument of domination or self actualisation.

This constant reification of Self and Other was shaped by fear and vulnerability. The hardship of training in a unforgiving culture of effectiveness and competence at all costs does not allow the recruit to sit with their fear. The processes of soldier production
inhibits the recruits sense of connection with Others, indeed it manipulates and
desensitises them, thus minimising the capacity for empathy with Others. One clear
division that emerged from this culture of Othering was that of the military/civilian
dichotomy. Civilians were predominantly represented as lazy, ineffective, and inferior to
soldiers. Civilians were feminised, both a potential threat to the nation, but also in need of
protection. This logic of identity generated a hierarchy of divisions that structured
military life: from man against man, to battalion vs battalion, corps vs corps (arms corps
were superior to service corps) or services vs services (the Army was superior to the
Navy or Air force) culminating in the civilian/military dichotomy. This military
masculinity was deeply competitive and adversarial. The potential for violence was
regulated and inhibited through mateship within the military context. However, in the
civilian context, the mateship solidarity works to generate Others through which the
bonds of men can be tried and legitimised. Arms-corps masculinity and mateship become
ideologies that threaten the safety of the broader community.

By way of a concluding example let me explain. Sexuality is a principle organising force
in these contexts. Flood explains in his research on Australian Defence Force Academy
recruits bond through shared sexualisation of women and sexual practice with women
(2003:6). His interviews with Australian Defence Force Academy recruits highlight how
young men develop mateship bonds through all-male nude parties, pornography nights,
picking up women or sharing women with their mates. The bonds of men, in these arms-
corps environments, are galvanised through the sexualisation of Others. In Townsville the
infantry soldiers I worked with would organise ‘pig nights’. They would go out on the
town to get as drunk as possible and to pick up the most (stereotypically) ugly girl they could find. These activities were also called ‘mogan hunts’ and success would accrue status for the soldier – the more depraved one could be in that situation would accrue more status. Other activities such as yelling abuse at women as you cruised by, engaging in group sex situations and developing photo boards of these, or individual, exploits, or the ‘pornos at mornos’ ritual where the ‘boys’ would bank up in an accommodation room for morning tea to watch highly explicit pornography were central to the bonds of mateship. This masculinity while crucial to making soldiers who can ‘win the land battle’, and intensely regulated in many ways, is also a ticking bomb or a loose cannon. The litany of abuse scandals that burden the Australian Military demonstrate the volatile character of the soldier subject and military masculinities.

**Conclusion**

As a soldier in the Australian Infantry I was left with the enduring experience of misogyny and depravity amongst groups of men in institutional circumstances. While the Army’s public persona and spirit was one of justice, a ‘fair-go’ and community building, I came to believe that this military culture had its own dark side – the shadow of masculinist violence. In this paper I have argued that military masculinities are shaped through a clearly identifiable institutional process.

The new recruit goes through a rite of passage that involves separation, liminality and aggregation, marked by the mortification of the self, rituals of degradation and the elevation of the superior. The rite of passage is marked by a resubjectification of the
recruit from civilian to soldier, from boy to man, from ‘ineffective being’ to a ‘superior and highly proficient being’. The process generates a dynamic of solidarity and antipathy that diminishes the soldier’s individual sense of accountability and elevates his desire to be part of the brotherhood. Mateship is the principal technology for achieving this aim. Masculinity, sexuality and race, indeed a plethora of differences, are drawn upon to generate this dynamic of exclusion and solidarity. In this sense, the arms-corps masculinity is hegemonic; controlling, dominating and instrumental, equipped with the potential for violence, both inside and outside of the military context. In times when the Australian Army rhetoric argues that the practice of warfare has moved from the warrior mythology to the ethos of the professional soldier and peacekeeper, and when the practices of arms-corps soldiers are attracting public attention for their acts of depravity and violence, it is time to rethink how soldiers are trained and how Armies manage the scope of their core business: violence.

**References**


