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Doing military fitness: physical culture, civilian leisure and militarism

Abstract

Drawing explicitly upon the bodily techniques of military basic training and the corporeal competencies of ex-military personnel, military-themed fitness classes and physical challenges have become an increasingly popular civilian leisure pursuit in the UK over the last two decades. This paper explores the embodied regimes, experiences and interactions between civilians and ex-military personnel that occur in these emergent hybrid leisure spaces. Drawing on ethnographic data, I argue that commercial military fitness involves a repurposing and rearticulation of collective military discipline within a late modern physical culture that emphasizes the individual body as a site of self-discovery and personal responsibility. Military fitness is thus a site of a particular biopolitics, of feeling alive in a very specific way. The intensities and feelings of physical achievement and togetherness that are generated emerge filtered through a particular military lens, circulating around and clinging to the totem of the repurposed ex-martial body. In the commercial logic of the fitness market, being 'military' and the ex-soldier's body have thus become particularly trusted and affectively resonant brands.

Keywords: military fitness, physical culture, embodiment, ex-military, militarism

Military-themed fitness classes and physical challenges have become an increasingly popular civilian leisure pursuit and significant commercial enterprise in the UK over the last two decades.¹ Every day thousands of non-military personnel take part in a variety of activities ranging from military fitness classes in public parks, to weekend and week-long retreats that simulate aspects of bootcamp, to physically gruelling obstacle course and assault course style challenges designed by ex-special forces personnel. Such activities, that often draw very explicitly upon the bodily techniques, rhythmic practices and spatial awareness developed in traditional sequestered sites of military discipline such as basic training, now form one of the fastest growing sectors of a burgeoning commercial fitness and leisure market. Examples of well-known and popular military-themed fitness activities in the UK include British Military Fitness (BMF), Regiment Fitness, Military Workout, Civilian Military Fitness, and the obstacle course style challenges Tough Guy, The Major Series and Tough Mudder. The fitness market is highly lucrative and competitive, and such activities particularly promote themselves around the fact that their instructors are ex-military personnel. The brand and practice of military fitness is thus fundamentally reliant upon the embodied competencies of ex-servicemen and women, whilst offering those that it employs the continuity of a particular type of 'corporeal career' (Higate 2013) that values their particular skill-sets and embodied capitals.

The examination of the regimes, interactions and experiences of state military training in which the embodied skills, capacities, reflexes and habits of soldiering are developed has a particular analytic history. Burchell (2014) for example has examined the development of specific forms of skilful movement in Royal Marines training, while Lande (2007) has explored the body pedagogics through which recruits learn how to 'breathe like a soldier' whilst firing weapons.²

Foucault (1977) famously saw the military as a foundational laboratory of disciplinary power where the docile bodies of recruits become subject to, and ultimately subject themselves to, various practices of corporeal transformation through which specific martial dispositions and competencies become inculcated. As Higate (2013: 114) notes, the ultimate aim of this embodied military training ‘is to reconfigure body-selves towards the functional imperatives of military objectives’.

However, to date there has been very limited scholarly analysis of this major repurposing of basic training for wider commercial fitness and leisure pursuits, which serve no obvious functional military imperatives in terms of e.g. training, recruitment or state-sponsored promotion.³ Nor has there been any academic analysis of the associated embodied regimes, experiences and interactions between civilians and ex-military personnel that occur in these independent spaces and potentially constitute a significant new type of ‘ritual space for co-constructing what we might call a “communal army experience”’ (Jauregui 2015: 458). Wider cultural discourse on military fitness has tended to veer between positive puff-pieces in the lifestyle sections of national and local newspapers, magazines and websites (e.g. The Daily Mail, The Guardian, The Evening Standard, Metro, sofeminine.co.uk) or a reading of the phenomenon in terms of a more pernicious, if slightly farcical, militarisation. For example, in the political magazine *The New Statesman*, the cultural commentator Will Self sees the emergence of commercial military fitness as symptomatic of ‘Britain’s ongoing flirtation with a military way of life’:

‘behold the invasion of the rent-a-squaddies ... it seems that BMF is above the law when it comes to being paramilitary ... this bizarre territorial expansion is likely to continue ... we can look forward to no dog-shit-bedizened scrap of public space being without its tracksuited occupiers by 2025’ (Self 2014)

Alternatively, writing in *The Guardian*, Barney Ronay (2014) sums up military fitness as an experience where one can ‘Pretend, just for an hour or so, that you are Prince Harry’ and, shown in the *Modern Times* series, the BBC Two (2015) documentary *Weekend Warriors* follows the experiences of five men – an estranged father and son, a young man who dropped out of official military basic training, and two middle-aged men coming out of failed relationships – as they undertake the obstacle course challenge *Tough Mudder*, the narrative constructed in the programme essentially being one of military fitness as an idiom for engaging with a crisis of masculinity.

How then might we think about this burgeoning commercial and cultural phenomenon – as an expression of military seduction or re-enactment, class tourism, masculinity reconstituted or in crisis, a quest for authenticity in modern times, post-9/11 anxiety, body fascism, fun? In this paper, I attempt to develop an initial understanding of military fitness beyond the rather reductive ways that wider cultural commentary has framed it to date. Before that, I wish to briefly consider some of the literature on militarism and militarisation, and its relative neglect of issues of embodiment and physical culture.

Embodying militarism

There is a specific tradition of historical scholarship concerned with the broad relationship of physical culture and activity, including sport, to military power and the perceived health of the body politic in both totalitarian and non-totalitarian societies. Richard Gruneau (1997: 192) for example argues broadly that:

‘images and ideas of human activity in Western societies – along with attitudes to the shape, smell, and the look of the human body – are distinctly social and cultural products grounded in relations of power. The definition and promotion of good activity, good health, the good body, and the good life have always been (and continue to be) a matter of negotiation and struggle between powerful social groups, often with markedly different understandings of how life should be lived’.

Gruneau suggests that ‘active living’ has been used and promoted in many societies as a form of state-building activity, with fitness and physical activity being practiced as a duty and a form of social mobilization, group identification and political allegiance (see also Girginov 2004, Mangan (ed) 2004, Mayes 2015). Relatedly, there is a long history of concerns over a perceived lack of fitness in the population and a potential deterioration of military strength and the body politic, for example in the US in the 1920s (Carden-Coyne 2005) and under Italian Fascism (Helstosky 2004). Such concerns continue to the present day, for example in the recent US military-supported campaign to alter the content of school meals to pre-empt the potential national security threat of American schoolchildren growing up ‘Too Fat to Fight’ (Burrige and McSorley 2013). Cultural histories of the body have also made broad links between particular physiques, and associated ideas of what fitness is, with wider military and geopolitical imaginations, for example, a hardening and toughening of the American body in the Cold War period as a response to a diffuse atmosphere of threat (Crawford 1980, deMause 1984).

Nonetheless, there is limited work on contemporary physical culture in this vein. Indeed, contemporary discussions on the topic of ‘militarism’ often exhibit a particular cognitivist bias in terms of being conceptualised predominantly in terms of the analysis of specific militaristic attitudes, beliefs or ideologies that shape decision-making and/or influence wider support for warfighting (McSorley 2014)⁴. Relatedly, an empirical turn in much recent work on militarism towards the examination of contemporary popular cultural representations, understood predominantly as political communication, has rarely been accompanied by a detailed consideration of contemporary physical culture and activity. There is a potential analytic danger here that militarism as a social and cultural force may become narrowly conceptualised in terms of symbolic manipulations in the head.⁵

However, as the anthropologist Catherine Lutz (2009) notes, despite the largely uncritical acceptance in the US of what she terms the ‘military normal’, people rarely articulate militarist beliefs in everyday life in any detail or as an explicit ideology concerning e.g. the necessity of war readiness or the legitimacy of having vast military force. Despite the fact that militarism is rarely made sense of in terms of a clearly thought through set of rational principles, a type of militarism does nonetheless ‘make sense’ to many people as something that is simply *felt* to be instinctively right, often from an early age. As Shilling (2007: 13) argues, ‘abstract social norms may inhere within the deepest fibres of our bodily being’. Whilst often going unsaid, militarist feelings may also be summonsed in particular interactions and places and at particular times.⁶ I suggest that it is important to try and understand ‘militarism’ in such terms as something that is *felt*, as much as, if not at times more than, something that is explicitly *thought* about, and that analysis needs to be attentive to how forms of militarism may be unreflexively assumed, embodied and summonsed through mundane physical idioms, intercorporeal interactions, structures of feeling and sensory practices that occur across and between various constituencies, both civilian and military.

The historian William McNeil (1997) for example has examined how the rhythmic practices of drill and marching together in time foster ‘muscular bonding’ and have been central to the creation of military ‘esprit de corps’ across history. He depicts his own initial experiences in the US army as follows:

‘Marching aimlessly about on the drill field, swaggering in conformity with prescribed military postures, conscious only of keeping in step so as to make the next move correctly and in time somehow felt good. Words are inadequate to describe the emotion aroused by the prolonged movement in unison that drilling involved. A sense of pervasive well-being is what I recall; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in collective ritual’ (1997: 2)

This is essentially a description of ‘collective effervescence’ (Durkheim 1915), of emotional binding to something bigger than one’s individual self, an intercorporeal recognition of the social, here as organised and refracted through the military (see also King 2013, Dyvik 2016). Burrige and McSorley (2013) suggest more widely that forms of embodied militarism may be traced across multiple bodies and constituencies in everyday life, being inculcated in mundane idioms from fashion and diet through to leisure and gaming, often resonating in contemporary times with wider pacific, neo-liberal discourses of body image and makeover. It is through such everyday practices that broad cultural recruitment and the constitution of particular ‘embodied communities’ (Basham 2013) involved in, and supportive of, war preparedness may take place. Bernazolli and Flint (2009) relatedly suggest the need for more grounded studies of the place-specific processes that may embed militarism in particular communities, a call echoed in Rech’s argument for greater analytic engagement with ‘situated, local and embodied experience of militarism and military recruitment’ (2014: 251). The work that I will now go on to describe is a particular attempt to engage with the corporeality, materiality and sociality of civilian military fitness. In the conclusion, I will return to discuss in what sense, if at all, this specific set of experiences and interactions may be thought of in terms of militarism and feeling military.

Doing military fitness

This paper is part of a wider ongoing project that uses a mixed-methods approach to explore contemporary military-themed leisure and physical activities. One strand of this project involves interviewing both participants and instructors engaged in military fitness classes about their specific experiences of, and their motivations for, undertaking such activities. Another strand, which informs the analysis presented below, consists of an auto-ethnographic engagement with military fitness. I have been directly participating in military fitness classes in two UK towns (one whose culture and economy is significantly based around the military, and one which has no significant military links and whose culture and economy is more diverse) for the past two years, attending classes on average once or twice per week. The series of analytic reflections presented below emerges principally from this engagement and from a data corpus of contemporaneous field-notes that were written up immediately following each class attended. The focus here is thus on my attempt to acquire, and convey, a detailed sense of the specific embodied practices, sensations and feelings that constitute military fitness in a particular space, to develop a particular experiential sociology *from* the body (Wacquant 2015). Theoretically the analysis is broadly informed by a phenomenological understanding of embodiment as the existential condition of possibility for culture and self (Merleau-Ponty 1962) and methodologically by traditions of sensory ethnography (Pink 2009) and carnal

sociology (Crossley 1995, Wacquant 2004). As opposed to more genealogical analyses of physical discipline, carnal sociology particularly attempts to address ‘the active role of the body in social life ... it is concerned with *what the body does* and it stresses and examines the *necessarily embodied bases* ... of the social formation’ (Crossley 1995: 43). Such traditions of analysis have been particularly developed through engagement with physical and sporting cultures in recent years (see e.g. Allen-Collinson 2009, Nettleton 2013, Sanchez and Spencer (eds) 2013).

Overview

In the military fitness classes that I attend, the age of participants ranges from late teens to sixties, with the majority of the members in their twenties, thirties and forties, as indeed is the case for many fitness classes in commercial gyms. Significantly, classes are attended by more women than men, roughly 60%-40%, as opposed to other genres of exercise, e.g. weight training, that have historically been associated with very different gendered constituencies⁷. In a typical workout session, members arrive at a pre-ordained meeting point in a public park ready-changed in their exercise gear. A uniform of coloured and numbered bibs is provided for members to wear. The colour of the bib – blue, red or green – is self-selected by the member to indicate their current fitness level – beginner, intermediate or advanced. This will partly dictate the number and intensity of exercises that they will be expected to perform during the session. The numbers on the bibs are meaningless except that, rather than using the members’ names, instructors will refer to members by those numbers during the session – ‘*keep up red 57*’ etc. Classes always begin exactly on time and punctuality is strongly emphasized such that the integration of latecomers is essentially non-existent. Apart from shoes, exercise clothes and the bib, military fitness members do not carry or wear any other personal artifacts for the duration of the session. Watches, fitness monitors, ipods, headphones etc. are removed for safekeeping by instructors.

As the class begins, members line up in two ranks and ‘double on the spot’ (light jogging) while instructors check for any injuries or illnesses. Sessions begin and end with light warmup/warmdown and stretching exercises. Classes have a broad underlying vocabulary of aerobic, cardiovascular and resistance exercises, alongside various other movement and ‘trust’ exercises, but they are very diverse in terms of the particular structure and combinations of these exercises. There is lots of rhythmic movement to different points in the landscape in between sets of exercises, often by running in two files. The majority of the exercises require no equipment, resistance being obtained from the members’ own body postures or by being paired with a partner. Instructors organise the session, demonstrate and advise on proper bodily form, and maintain a particular atmosphere both by encouraging more effort and acknowledging the effort put in.

‘Feel Alive Outside’⁸

Military fitness is thus constituted through a specific entanglement of bodily practices and rhythms within a particular environment and atmosphere. In particular, the *outdoors* is the key medium through which the potential of bodies to assume military fitness may begin to materialise. As Hockey (1991, 2009) and Woodward (1998) note with reference to UK armed forces training, the militarisation of bodies and the development of the soldierly habitus is not an abstract, placeless process. Military training requires learning very particular ways of being in specific spaces and typically involves the subjection of the body to multiple challenges provided by the natural environment, e.g. moving at speed with heavy kit across moorland and

mountains, or indeed holding a position completely still and silent for extended periods of time whilst cold, wet and exhausted. Such practices further require the acquisition of particular militarised forms of sensation, ways of parsing the landscape that are specifically attuned to the apprehension and identification of opportunity and threat. The attainment of military competency is thus dependent upon enduring and overcoming myriad demands that are specifically constituted in and through particular and varied embodied relationships to terrain and climate. Any failure to achieve dominance over the fundamentally intertwined demands of the body and environment is ultimately understood as a failure to become a soldier.⁹

There is a related stress in commercial military fitness that the shaping of the body and the attainment of military fitness specifically occurs through the occupation of the mundane yet mutable outdoors, with an associated reading of the landscape for specific affordances and seasonal variations. At times, this includes reading or ‘hacking’ the environment in various unexpected ways, e.g. repurposing boulders and trees as hurdles or postural supports, modulating the particular feel and intensity of exercises by training specifically in mud or on stony beaches, even sculpting obstacles and weights for temporary use in class from snow. Instructors take the lead in calling or gesturing to the lines to be taken across the terrain and the rhythms to adopt, as well as inculcating particular dimensions of proprioceptive and situational awareness e.g. via calls to attend to particular features of the landscape, or to look all around whilst moving, or to perform certain exercises and crawls with the eyes shut, heightening the salience of sound and touch.

Indeed, there is a palpable emphasis upon haptic exposure in military fitness, upon exercising robustly whatever the weather, often embracing the full touch of the elements in an almost fetishistic manner rather than hoping or seeking to avoid the effects of inclement conditions. For example, when the ground is wet, classes will swiftly turn to exercising in a fully prone position, including face down, so that the discomfort of the body becoming cold and dirty, and of clothing getting sodden, is rapidly felt and in turn more quickly overcome, partly by making such discomfort explicitly communal and intercorporeal. Classes are never cancelled because of harsh conditions and there is an attitude of not being deterred from exercising because of the vagaries of the British weather. Indeed, embracing this diversity also extends to exercising whatever the ambient light conditions. Well-attended classes are scheduled in the very early mornings, beginning at 6.30am, and late evenings, beginning at 8pm, and such classes are scheduled as normal in the winter months, even when it is dark and visibility is poor. The particular deprivations and distortions of darkness only add to the challenge and the mutable multisensory engagements of military fitness.

Unlike many countryside pursuits and leisurely ways of being in the outdoors, the overall mode of apprehension here is not primarily aesthetic or sublime. Rather the particular ‘somatic mode of attention’ (Csordas 1993) of military fitness is an exposed, unpretentious and committed attunement to the outdoors and its associated challenges. Indeed, a primary sense and ethos of ‘getting your hands dirty’ informs both the conduct of the classes as well as being an extremely common motif in local group communications, e.g. on social media, and wider corporate communications:

You don't have to be super fit and healthy to join BMF, you just have to be willing to get your hands dirty and have a dedication to improve your life ... our members love the exhilarating feeling exercising outdoors gives them as opposed to the gym ... we just want to share this feeling with everyone. (Rob Love, Managing Director BMF, 2014)

If and when they do occur, moments of sublime appreciation of the outdoors only tend to happen after the main business of the class is completed, particularly during the warm-down. At such times, when the work is done and the prevailing somatic mode of attention begins to shift and leave bodies, specific sights and sounds can suddenly appear newly salient, transcendent and uplifting. Indeed, group attention is often drawn to such sublime sensations by instructors, orienting the group to face a rural sunset or to listen to *'the beautiful sound'* of the crashes of the sea during the warm-down, as if they constitute a shared reward for everyone's previous efforts, even a form of sensory exceptionalism that could not be revealed to or appreciated by anyone without them having gone through the previous physical exertions (Nettleton 2013).

Military fitness then is constituted outdoors, its cosmology a fundamental intertwining of specific bodies and the natural environment, its corporeal accretion predicated upon continual exposure to the touch of the elements and the obduracy of the earth.

Rhythm and Intensity

Together with the occupation of specific spaces, the group entrainment of particular temporal rhythms is also central to the pedagogics of military fitness. Facilitated by the removal of personal watches, any individual sense of time becomes subservient to a wider group temporality in military fitness classes. This collaborative rhythm is most significantly shaped via the issuing of firm directives by instructors as to which patterns of exercise to perform, how many repetitions to do, the pace at which to carry out sets of exercises, and when to stop and rest. The rhythm and intensity of this 'fitness time' is continuously stretched and strained by instructors through techniques such as delaying the expected end to a particular set of exercises via the addition of extra repetitions and variations, by speeding up the pace of repetitions performed for a particular amount of time, as well as via the deliberate elongation and slowing down of countdowns when the exercise involves holding an exhausting postural stance for a particular count. During exercise then, the experience for members is primarily of an unknowable but intensely-felt temporality, a more or less continuous present that is felt tightly within the muscles and the body and is accompanied predominantly by the thought of 'is it over yet?' until eventual release or collapse.

The entrainment of rhythm is not simply top-down however. Micro-adjustments are continually made by participants to synchronize with the tempo of partners and other adjacent members and hence rhythms also flow horizontally across the group. Members also learn how to pace themselves in relation to overarching temporal rhythms, gradually developing a feel for how to modulate their own effort across particular patterns of exercise, as well as across the whole session. This pacing allows them to try and cope with the inevitable contingencies that will be introduced and to try and retain some sense that they will only end up completely fatigued at the end of the class. As Crossley (2004) notes of the temporality of circuit training in gyms, this is not calculation or timing in any explicit sense but the development of a pre-reflective corporeal sense of time passed as measured against effort expended and the member's sense of their own embodied capacities. Further, the instructors' predictable interjection of unpredictability into the patterns and rhythms of military fitness can be understood as an ongoing attempt to disrupt this ongoing accommodation. The co-constitution and negotiation of rhythm and effort is part of the 'game' of military fitness, and much of the commentary and vocalization by all participants during classes – such as cries of mock indignation at the extension of timings, playful declarations about the instructors' severity and

counter-declarations about members' slacking – refers to and constitutes the parameters of this negotiation.

Despite there being this level of negotiation, including some largely symbolic elements of resistance, the key universal norm that ultimately underpins and animates the moral order of military fitness is putting in *intense effort*. Whilst particular individuals may have various personal reasons for initially choosing to participate in such fitness classes as well as varying levels of ability, there is a co-constituted expectation that all individuals will attempt to work hard during classes whatever their underlying level of ability. This norm, that the ultimate point of the classes is to work out, is co-constituted and maintained in the interaction order¹⁰ by both instructors and other members alike. Indeed, this immanent and collaborative production of motivation and effort, whether one initially felt like exercising or not, is one of the key attractions of exercising collectively rather than individually. As such, rather than the demonstration of particularly impressive abilities or the achievement of extraordinary outcomes being particularly lauded, it is grit and determination, whatever your underlying level of ability, that is most explicitly acknowledged by all participants. This occurs particularly through constant phatic communication and positive reinforcement – *good work, keep pushing, well done, keep going* etc. The interaction order is also viscerally punctuated by members' grunts and groans as a perceptible performance of their exertions. Again, the moral order of the class mitigates against there being any embarrassment or self-consciousness around such exhortations or other associated bodily expressions such as profuse sweating. More regular norms of social interaction and decorum are relaxed and indeed if anything a level of social opprobrium is invoked against the embodied state of *not* getting a sweat on. Likewise, a particular kinesthetic grammar is fashioned in military fitness such that, for example, even during the brief rest periods between sets of exercises, there is a norm of not coming to a complete standstill. In particular, specific embodied norms of deportment exist around the placing of hands on the hips or in pockets while resting. Such behaviour is explicitly discouraged by instructors and if unknowingly performed by new participants, other members will draw their attention to the practice as something that may draw censure. Such embodied micro-practices are thus initially consciously self-policed but very rapidly become integrated into the unreflexive habitus of doing military fitness.

A further significant act in the production of *intensity* in military fitness occurs when embodied conditions such as exhaustion or dizziness are induced and such states are specifically experienced and framed, both in the particular moment and in post-class discussion, as conditions which can be positively and productively worked through and partially overcome, in the process expanding a self-understanding of the limits of what the body can do. As mentioned, instructors will often call and encourage exercise patterns where the difficulty is continuously cranked up even while exhaustion is occurring, or call patterns that specifically inculcate uncoordinated movements e.g. sprinting immediately after prolonged leg muscle exercises. Such patterns can translate at certain moments into practical embodied learning - that exhaustion *can* be pushed through and 'second wind' felt, or that composure and co-ordination can be actively regained with minimal rest. As Crossley (2004) relatedly notes, the valorization of experiences of pain, for example in the adage 'no pain, no gain', and the development of the embodied ability to perceive and differentiate 'productive' pain experiences, learning to 'feel the burn' in colloquial terms, is a significant element of many fitness cultures. Likewise the ethos of military fitness emphasizes intensity and productive experiential learning that is based upon the imbrication of pain and exhaustion with achievement and pleasure¹¹.

Materiel and Camaraderie

Alongside the particular spatio-temporal practices and embodied intensities detailed in the preceding sections, military fitness is assembled from and through various other material artifacts, symbolic motifs and corporeal resources that have specific military resonances and functions. A number of examples are discussed in the following section, their cumulative assemblage further establishing the particular atmosphere and ethos of military fitness.

Firstly, basic embodied technologies of discipline such as lining up and moving in ranks and files constitute the fundamental organisational grammar of military fitness. These formations are used to order movements across the outdoors space and to regulate transitions between exercise patterns. Secondly, the conduct of classes is accompanied by instructors' deployment of a very particular vernacular that is liberally punctuated with specific military terminology and slang e.g. *'fall in'*, *'run down to the oggin'*, *'don't disturb the civvies'*, *'do your Afghan squats'*, *'show me your war face'*, and so on. This vernacular further enrolls members into a particular interpretative community and contributes to an overall rendering of the environment and associated activity through a particular military filter. Thirdly, military fitness typically involves minimal equipment as compared to, for example, gym workouts that may utilise a series of sophisticated exercise machines. Rather it relies primarily on the environment and members' bodies to provide challenges and resistance. However, on certain occasions specific equipment is introduced into classes. When this happens it tends to be of a very specific type comprising heavy materiel such as ammunition boxes or large tyres. Such equipment is typically deployed by being carried or dragged around the outdoors environment, often by teams of members in the style of military tattoos. While this materiel can be thought of as a prop used to enhance the 'authentic' look of military fitness, it also has relational agency and functions as part of a hybrid assemblage to entangle the individual bodies of members into the becoming of a particular collective military body for a certain period of time.

The most salient and significant military motif on display, and the regular focus of the gaze in classes, is the ex-soldier's body¹². All military fitness instructors are ex-members of the armed forces, the majority having also qualified and worked as military Physical Training Instructors (PTIs). They are often recruited word of mouth from Purbright and other major basic training centres in the UK. Instructors oversee classes wearing military-style uniforms - black military boots, combat trousers, branded t-shirts and camouflage rucksacks – and are themselves embodied exemplars of military fitness. They demonstrate the normatively correct form of particular exercises, as well as at times physically showing members what they are doing incorrectly, mirroring the 'unruly' aspects of members' technique which they may be unable to see themselves. The embodied capabilities that commercial military fitness draws upon includes not only their embodied knowledge and demonstration of particular bodily techniques but also specific practices of 'affective labour' (Freeman 2011) developed in the course of becoming a PTI, such as the inculcation of particular atmospheres and motivations during training.

Military fitness also engenders, and its continuity and long-term success is dependent upon, the development of particular feelings of camaraderie amongst members. Fellow-feeling and commitment is a feature of many leisure pursuits and fitness cultures where the activity of participants within a particular space is primarily oriented towards an individual but normatively shared goal such as working out or keeping fit. This levelling of status and alignment of moral orientation is itself heightened in military fitness through particular practices such as the wearing of coloured bibs over generic fitness attire. Indeed, the ability to

attribute any external status or wider moral concern to members is reduced even further in military fitness in comparison to many other fitness cultures as members arrive in the parks already fully changed for the classes. In gyms there typically exists the intermediate and liminal space of the changing rooms where the multiple sartorial resources and symbolic props of various working lives are exchanged, as well as seen to be exchanged, for the fitness attire that is more instrumentally suited to the shared goal of working out within the gym space (Sassatelli 1999). Within military fitness, there is a lack even of this transitional space whereby the existence of outside statuses and concerns beyond the normative commitments of the group may be glimpsed.

Most significantly however, it is the entrainment of shared bodily rhythms and communal intensities that engenders the collective emotional binding of military fitness. Intercorporeal feelings of camaraderie are enhanced by the fact that military fitness is fundamentally constituted through mutual bodily contact, through the physical interaction and literal support of multiple and regularly changing exercise partners. The structure of feeling and emotional experience of military fitness is thus one of shared pains, pleasures and achievements materially grounded in a brother and sisterhood of shared touch, sweat and mud. Indeed, the horizontal camaraderie of military fitness is further exemplified in particular rituals such as the birthdays of individual members being celebrated in a manner that recognizes, but also penalizes, the temporary ascription of this 'special' status, e.g. by throwing the celebrant into the sea or by allocating them additional exercises.

While the affective atmosphere and ethos of military fitness is undoubtedly resonant of professional military training, it is also important to stress that other central elements of professional training such as unforgiving and rigorously authoritarian discipline, practices such as 'beasting' - the arbitrary administration of extreme physical punishments for minor or invented infringements of rules - and violent embodied excesses such as being pushed and pushed until you puke are unsurprisingly not part of the interaction order. Such practices may be gestured at, for example in the issuing of moderate physical forfeits as punishment for actions such as the placing of hands on hips. However ultimately the actual presence of such severe practices only haunts the space of commercial military fitness, invoked at most as an obviously empty threat and a source of humour by instructors.¹³

Discussion

I have outlined some of the key contours of a particular assemblage of military fitness, a practice and institution which has embodied and emotional continuities with professional military training, as well as having a family resemblance with other contemporary fitness practices and cultures. While classic regimes of military biopower are certainly referenced in military fitness, it is clearly not a replication of the 'total institution' (Goffman 1991) of military basic training, which is fundamentally reliant upon extreme discipline and the comprehensive mortification of a previous sense of individual self in order to enable the development of a uniform soldierly habitus and a particular martial and embodied skill-set. Indeed, coming from this tradition of analysis, military fitness more closely resembles what Susie Scott (2010), drawing upon Goffman, calls a 'reinventive institution', which members crucially *elect* to participate in for delimited periods of time for the purpose of 'self-improvement'. For Scott, reinventive institutions crucially operate through a form of discipline which is not merely transmitted from above, but constituted through an agentic network of mutual surveillance, 'performative regulation', and bodily entrainment.

The contemporary emergence of new leisure practices such as military fitness thus represents the repurposing and rearticulation of particular elements of classic collective military discipline within a late modern physical culture that predominantly emphasizes the individual body as a site of self-discovery, self-expression and personal responsibility (Giddens 1991, Shilling 2008), and within an ever-burgeoning fitness and leisure landscape that is increasingly characterised by discourses and practices through which individualised body projects are reflexively shaped in line with particular neoliberal desires for transformation, self-actualization, challenge and thrill¹⁴. Doing military fitness thus constitutes an emergent hybrid form of self-governance, a more volitional, embodied and transfigured auto-militarisation that is nonetheless fundamentally reliant upon an assemblage of other materiel, affects and bodies, not least the corporeal careers, competencies and embodied exemplars of ex-military personnel, and that is being enacted within multiple and diffuse spaces of commercial leisure beyond the classic sites of military discipline and state authority and biopower.

I argue that the dominant structure of feeling of military fitness, the atmosphere of the classes, is one that constitutes, accumulates and valorises particular embodied experiences and intercorporeal flows of aliveness, intensity (both pleasurable and painful) and fellow-feeling. These travel through and are deeply grounded in dirt, in elemental exposure, and in the rhythmic attunements, exhaustions and physical bindings of members' bodies. The ethos of military fitness, the crucial norm of the interaction order, is simply one of immersion into this generative environment whatever your level of ability, of willing entanglement with and absorption into the affective contours and the intense centripetal flows that swirl, gather around, and ultimately have at their very heart the ex-soldier's body.

To conclude then, I wish to briefly discuss how we might try and think through this emergence and phenomenology of military fitness in terms of its relationship with, or challenge to, wider academic discourses of militarism and militarisation. Firstly, it is important to state that commercial military fitness cannot be adequately understood in terms of a civilian sphere being explicitly shaped by specific military imperatives or the permeation of classic militaristic values. The emergence of commercial military fitness is not directly linked to state preparation for war in terms of e.g. armed forces recruitment or the production of citizen-soldiers, nor with explicitly inculcating wider support for warfighting. Indeed, there is very little explicitly or classically militarist, or indeed para-militarist, going on here in the way that militarism is traditionally thought about and analysed in terms of particular economic institutions and arrangements, political ideologies and communications, or popular cultural representations that specifically legitimate war and shape war preparedness.

As Beatrice Jauregui (2015: 457) notes, militarisation often tends to be conceived in terms of 'a process of invasive contamination assumed to be driven by a relatively static, destructive, and hyper-empowered military through a domestic and global citizenry that otherwise would be more constructive and healthy'. The complex lived experiences and embodied transformations and feelings of commercial military fitness that I have detailed here cannot be faithfully interpreted in such terms, nor indeed can its instantiation be traced back to a sovereign authority or indeed an immutable disciplinary logic. Rather military fitness emerges in and through the heterogeneous entanglement and resonance of multiple military grammars, commercial logics, and contemporary desires and body projects, even as they all swirl rhythmically around the paradigmatic ex-soldier's body. The classic analytic of militarism lacks purchase when considering such phenomena partly because it assumes, or attempts to discern, a linear direction of causality or contamination, and partly because it rarely attempts to engage with physical culture and its associated and capricious structures of feeling.¹⁵

Jauregui relatedly argues that classic critiques of militarism need to be rethought particularly when the US military itself is currently engaged in a wide rearticulation of its activities in terms of a ‘hermeneutics of military service as global opportunity rather than civic duty or patriotic obligation’ (2015: 451). In an analysis of military outreach initiatives such as Army Experience Centres and the Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness programme, she argues broadly that ‘apparently prosocial and transnational concepts of family, community, opportunity, education, recreation and resilience are being mobilized together as a form of progressive humanism that works to disseminate a distinctly American vision of what I am calling “World Fitness”’ (2015: 451, see also Howells 2014).

I suggest here that dominant extant vocabularies of militarism, that are often inattentive to issues of physical culture, embodiment and sensation, cannot easily or usefully engage with the emergence of contemporary practices of commercial military fitness. They have difficulty speaking of the plural and intricate, fleeting and shifting imbrications and tonalities of discipline and camaraderie, pleasure and pain, exhaustion and aliveness that are central features of the intercorporeal body work that I have traced in this article. However, military fitness is nonetheless clearly an increasingly economically and culturally significant hybrid physical culture in the UK, and indeed far beyond¹⁶, whose practices and interactions generate intense emotions among its participants. The structure of feeling of military fitness is one that involves a particular trusting and valuing of military-related leisure, of the military lifestyle, as a specific paradigm of physical and moral education, as particularly exemplified in the body of the ex-soldier. Military fitness is thus a site of production of a particular biopolitics, of making life live, and of feeling alive, in a very specific way - one that, as McNeil (1997) notes, often simply ‘feels good’ even despite any cognitive reservations that one may potentially hold about ‘being militarist’, partly because the sheer physicality of military fitness tends to overcome any such self-consciousness. The intensities and feelings of physical achievement and togetherness that are generated, the embodied experiences of collective effervescence, of however fleetingly feeling part of something bigger than oneself, emerge filtered through a particular military lens, here circulating around and clinging to the totem of the repurposed ex-martial body. In terms of the commercial logic of the fitness and lifestyle market, being military and the ex-soldier’s body have thus become widely trusted and affectively resonant brands.¹⁷ Further, doing military fitness, and arguably more widely other instances of coming together to be military or ex-military, may be understood in terms of the intercorporeal co-constitution and (re-)animation of a particular ethic, a diffuse but jointly enabled and deeply *embodied* value orientation, that can provide and generate meaning and feeling across diverse sites and contexts.

To finish on a general note, the project of critical military studies consists in part of trying to trouble and rethink the ever-shifting ontologies and experiences of, as well as multiply the analytics of, the military and militarisms. I hope to have suggested in this paper that trying to explore, think through, and convey some of the complex embodied, emotional and sensory dimensions of ‘military’ experience, and paying particular analytic attention to hybrid military sites of physical culture and transformation, can be a productive part of this endeavour.

Notes

¹ As one example, British Military Fitness (BMF) currently employs 850 people (including 800 full-time instructors), and has 25,000 members taking regular exercise classes. BMF classes are offered in over 400 outdoor locations in 145 cities and towns across the UK (although notably while classes are offered in England, Scotland and Wales, none take place in Northern Ireland, where the presence of

military and paramilitary activity in outdoors public space has much more contentious recent connotations). The cost of BMF participation varies regionally and according to the number of classes taken. As an indicative guide, BMF membership in the South-East of England that allows participation in unlimited classes costs approximately £40 per month, roughly equivalent to gym membership. To give some idea of the growing economic significance of one sector of military-related fitness activities worldwide, more than 3 million people participated in military-style obstacle course challenges in 2013 with the industry accruing total revenues of more than US\$290 million, up from US\$16 million in 2010 (Rodriguez 2014).

² See also Ben-Ari (1998), Hockey (1991), McSorley (2013), Samimian-Darash (2012) Sasson-Levy (2008), Woodward (1998). As Hockey (2009) notes, the fact that there are relatively few studies that attempt to grapple with directly embodied material in researching soldiers' lives is largely due to the positivist nature of most military sociology.

³ Exceptions include two recent studies of the military-style obstacle-course challenge Tough Mudder in the US. Lamb and Hillman (2015) read participation in Tough Mudder as a 'cultural ritual in capitalist socialisation' (p.85) and 'gratuitous masculinity' (p.90) where 'corporate types can test themselves in order to provide additional rhetorical proof of being able to navigate the cutthroat, hostile, and insecure world of corporate capitalism' (p.97). Weedon's (2015) auto-ethnography of Tough Mudder, whilst noting that 'the figure of the triumphant mud runner is often marked by many layers of privilege that are, to critically trained social scientists, glaring invitations for deconstruction' (p.430), nonetheless also emphasises the intense camaraderie of participation in a 'profoundly shared endeavour, one in which a whole host of actors, human and otherwise, make dramatic and subtle contributions' (p.431).

⁴ For example, a broad definition offered by the social and political theorist Michael Mann of militarism is 'a set of *attitudes* and social practices which regards war and the preparation for war as a normal and desirable social activity' (1987: 35, *my italics*). Mann's specific identification of the emergence of 'spectator-sport militarism' in post-conscription Western societies, where direct military engagement with civilian bodies radically declines, is indicative of a shift away from theorising aspects of contemporary militarism in terms of embodiment and physical activity and towards spectacle and passivity. Similarly, C. Wright Mills' classic analysis of post WWII American society points to a 'military metaphysics' among the power elite - 'the *cast of mind* that defines international reality as basically military' (1956: 222, *my italics*). These types of analysis thus tend to predominantly conceptualize militarism as a *worldview* and an associated set of political-economic and institutional practices – raising taxes, organizing the production of arms and so on.

⁵ Further, as Hammond (2015) argues, many text-focussed critiques of 'militaristic' popular culture often tend to reproduce unexamined assumptions of audience passivity and vulnerability. In contrast, ethnographic work, e.g. Allen's (2009) study of military video-gaming at the Virtual Army Experience, has shown that consumers are often far from passive subjects who uncritically accept all of the messages in such military-themed popular culture.

⁶ As one infamous historical example, consider the raising of the arm in a Nazi salute. As Tilman (2008) points out, National Socialism transformed the most mundane aspect of human interaction - the everyday greeting - into an expression of political allegiance and militarist conformity amongst a whole society. It is partly through these sorts of habitual embodied gestures that forms of militarism may become assumed and felt to be normal and desirable. Further, as Elaine Scarry notes, once ingrained in the body such a political sensibility is not easily lost: 'the body's loyalty to these political realms is likely to be ... more permanently there, less easily shed, than those disembodied forms of patriotism that exist in verbal habits or in thoughts about one's national identity. The political identity of the body is usually learned unconsciously, effortlessly and very early' (1985: 109). Relatedly, Angharad Closs Stephens argues that 'nationality is often – if not mostly – experienced as a *feeling*. This might include

feelings of togetherness experienced at a stadium or a concert hall, the act of singing as part of a crowd ... or the ‘forcible affect’ of sharing a language with others’ (2015: 2).

⁷ This demographic profile appears consistent nationwide. For example, women make up more than half the total membership of BMF (Adams 2012). As such it is difficult to endorse the popular narrative that reads commercial military fitness simply in terms of men doing masculinity. Rather it suggests that particular ideas associated with traditional militarised masculine identity, e.g. resilience or discipline, may have become wider hegemonic ideals. By contrast, in the classes that I attend, the vast majority of the instructors are men.

⁸ ‘Feel Alive Outside’ is a prominent tagline in advertising for British Military Fitness.

⁹ Woodward (1998) specifically notes how such an understanding also resonates with traditional hegemonic understandings of masculinity, which have historically been constituted in relation to danger, adventure and dominance over nature.

¹⁰ The concept of the interaction order is particularly associated with the micro-sociological work of Erving Goffman. For Goffman, interaction is a domain of face-to-face social action characterized by its own form of delicate yet continually reproduced “procedural order” or “working consensus” (1959: 173).

¹¹ As Crossley (2004) notes, such an embrace of learning through pain is very different to the way that pain (principally externally inflicted pain) is theorised as radically interiorizing, unshareable and world-destroying in the work of scholars such as Scarry (1985).

¹² I use the term ex-soldier here as a convenient shorthand to refer to ex-members of all the armed forces. In practice, military fitness instructors in the UK are recruited from across the army, navy, marines, air force and special forces.

¹³ Whilst humorous, such an invocation discursively reconstitutes a specific boundary between instructors and members in that instructors’ expertise is based upon having had particular embodied experiences of military training, experiences whose excessive aspects have been excised from commercial military fitness.

¹⁴ There is a broad literature that critically explores the physical cultures of late modernity and the rise of various regimes of fitness and associated body projects specifically in terms of the currents and imperatives of consumerism and contemporary neoliberalism. See e.g. Giddens (1991), Gruneau (1997), Andrews and Silk (eds) (2012), Shilling (2008), Vertinsky and Hargreaves (eds) (2006).

¹⁵ Feminist scholarship within International Relations has been one key area of scholarship where themes of embodiment, everyday life, and military masculinities have been more explicitly explored as integral features of war, militarism and militarisation. For example, Enloe (2004: 219-20) defines militarisation as ‘the multi-tracked process by which the roots of militarism are driven deep down into the soil of a society’, her analysis moving from the heights of international politics and economics right down to the most mundane details of everyday personal and emotional lives. Hyde’s (2015) ethnographic work on women married to servicemen also troubles the very analytic divide between military and civilian spheres, arguing that ‘militarisation – as a state of being, as a lived experience – is nothing if not the very conflation and confusion of military and civilian, the simultaneous coexistence of multiple times and spaces, a grey area’ (p.9). See also e.g. Cockburn 1998, Sjoberg and Via (eds) 2010, Sylvester 2013.

¹⁶ While in this article I concentrate on UK military fitness, it is important to note that there has also been a huge growth in commercial military fitness activity across many countries in recent years - the US, Australia, South Africa, Sweden etc.

¹⁷ I am drawing here on Celia Lury's (2004) analysis of brands as objects of affective investment rather than simply status symbols.

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