

## **Chapter Six**

### **Unsung heroism?:**

#### **Showbusiness and social action in Britain's Military Wives Choir(s)**

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At the end of 2011, the 'Military Wives Choir', wives and girlfriends of British servicemen from bases at Plymouth and Chivenor, Devon, reached number one in the UK Christmas singles charts. As subjects of that year's BBC documentary *The Choir: Military Wives*, they had rehearsed with a professional choirmaster, Gareth Malone, to perform at the Festival of Remembrance in London's Royal Albert Hall. They continued to participate in British popular entertainment and commemoration by releasing two albums, joining the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations and appearing in a special Prom in 2014 to commemorate Britain entering the First World War. Over the same period, military wives choirs became part of many British bases' associational culture, as women moving with their husbands' postings spread the idea. A 'Military Wives Choirs Foundation' (MWCF), formed in early 2012, affiliated with the Forces' families charity SSAFA, claimed more than 75 member choirs in the UK, Germany, Cyprus, Belgium, Italy and Brunei as of January 2016 (MWCF 2016). These contributed to national performances but held many more localised events, seeking to offer the same emotional and practical support across service, regiment and rank boundaries that *The Choir* depicted in Devon.

The dual function of the Choir(s),<sup>1</sup> simultaneously showbusiness figures and social actors, reveals both the gendered construction of UK 'military heroism' and the limitations of 'heroism' for understanding the everyday operation of militarised power. They emerged amid

UK government, mass media and civil society all mobilising heroism discourses to argue for the military's sacrosanct place in British public life and, for government, to maintain popular consent for operations in Afghanistan (and initially Iraq) which the public did not necessarily esteem (Hines et al. 2015). Tabloids terming current/former troops 'war heroes', and the very name of the charity founded in 2007 (Help for Heroes) for rehabilitating wounded British personnel, made 'heroism' – and thus contestation over who was a hero or what acts were heroic – a key concept in the 'popular militarism' (Rech et al. 2015, 53) of the War on Terror (McCartney 2011; Kelly 2013). Remembrance traditions and, with the 1914 centenary approaching, First World War memory were important historical resources within this convergence of media, entertainment and celebrity with militarism (Basham 2016). Yet the material difficulties affecting deployed troops and their families, and wider tensions in the so-called 'military covenant' between Forces, state and society, showed those regarded as 'heroes' in the abstract were not necessarily so treated in practice (McCartney 2010; Forster 2012; Mumford 2012; Herman and Yarwood 2015).

'Military wives', as the Choir(s) symbolised, could both be voices praising male military heroes and be regarded as 'unsung heroes' themselves for the extensive 'emotional labour' (Atwood 2013, 1; Hyde 2016, 1) of sustaining military families. Malone's statement in a book on *The Choir* that '[t]he traditional role of military wives in this country has been to keep the home fires burning, as the song goes' (Malone 2012, 213), alluding to the well-known WW1 song and propaganda slogan (Haste 1977), indicates this very labour is often understood through a historical imagination blending the present with the heroic national past. Like any other construction of heroism or military power (Enloe 2015), examining the notion of military wives' unrecognised or 'unsung' heroism can reveal the boundaries and hierarchies of gender it reflects or might produce, and how gender interacts with other

stratifications such as race and class in determining who has most access to the role of ‘hero’. The archetypal wartime gender binary that Jean Bethke Elshtain (1987, xii) termed the male ‘Just Warrior’ and the female ‘Beautiful Soul’ (whose innocence, and reproductive capacity, must be protected by the husband–father–son) provides a fundamental script for particular imaginations of ‘military wives’. Although evidence of women’s participation in violence, men’s refusal of combat, and queer experiences complicating the gender binary all show this divide not to be *natural*, it remains the basis of ‘the victorious story that States tell about wars’ (Sjoberg 2010, 55) – and thus of stories that state institutions, and society, can be expected to tell about gender.

The very language of the military ‘hero’, indeed, suggests how fundamentally gendered narrative and plot, where the hero must overcome obstacles and fight his enemy to win his prize, might underpin public legitimation of war (Huston 1982). Popular-cultural narratives about ‘soldier heroes’, however defined, invite certain members of society – acceptable future military heroes – to invest affectively in this subject-position (Dawson 1994), and others to position themselves in relation to a soldier-hero outside themselves. The questions of what narratives depict *and* whose viewpoint they invite audiences to see them through are both, as Annick Wibben (2011) argues, important as a feminist analytic for understanding what is at stake in representations of war, conflict and security (Wibben 2011). ‘Militarization’, or the naturalisation of war and the military as institutions, is not just about and legitimising front-line heroism but also the militarised fabric of the everyday (Enloe 2000; Lutz 2002).

Just as the Choir was entering showbusiness, the very gendering of military heroism in Britain was, at least potentially, being renegotiated. In 1998, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) had opened many more posts to women, praising ‘modernity, progress [...] and the benefits

brought [...] by a diverse workforce', but continued excluding women from ground close combat roles in the infantry and Marines (Woodward and Winter 2007, 42). Warfare and counter-insurgency in Iraq/Afghanistan nevertheless exposed women to front-line dangers. Reviewing the combat exclusion in 2010, the MOD found some evidence women could be effective in ground close combat but upheld it due to 'potential risks associated with maintaining cohesion in small mixed-gender tactical teams' (Barry 2013, 25–6). One was the fear male soldiers would react over-emotionally to a woman's death; another, perhaps, that servicewomen would destabilise a gendered battlefield/home-front divide considered important for male combat soldiers' psychological preparation (Basham 2013, 57). After a third, positive review in December 2014, the MOD lifted the combat exclusion in July 2016: the institutional 'regendering' (Duncanson and Woodward 2016) of the combat hero was already, therefore, beginning as the Choir(s) emerged.<sup>2</sup> Their public representation, however, upheld – at least at first sight – a more traditional gendering of war and heroism.

The Choir(s) therefore existed on two different levels of social activity at once. Publicly, they were part of contemporary Britain's entertainment–military–commemorative complex (a term this chapter uses in allusion to James Der Derian's expansion of the phrase 'military–industrial complex' into the interdependent 'military–industrial–media–entertainment network' he identifies in contemporary warfare (Der Derian 2009); I use it to hint at a more contingent convergence of institutional and representational interests around symbols and narratives of war memory in 21st-century Britain). At the same time, however, they were also embedded in the everyday negotiations of military/state power that constitute lived experience of militarisation. Research on the military's gendered everyday geopolitics has explored service personnel's masculinities and the gendered spatial politics of garrison towns but until very recently neglected the institution of marriage or civilian partners (Enloe 2016), such as the British 'army wives' in Germany with whom Alexandra Hyde (2016, 2)

conducted fieldwork during their husbands' deployment. This chapter demonstrates these everyday dimensions are essential for understanding the place of the Choir(s) in contestations of military heroism by drawing on critical military geography, feminist media studies and the social/cultural history of twentieth century and twenty-first century war.

## **The Choir: Military Wives**

Narratives about the national Choir appear in BBC documentaries from 2011, 2012 and 2014; the 2012 paperback *Wherever You Are: Our True Stories of Heartbreak, Hope and Love*; sections of Malone's 2012 book *Choir*; and many profiles and interviews in UK local and national press since 2011. *The Choir* was an existing BBC series where Malone visited communities low in confidence to support them to triumph through choral singing. After a Catterick-based psychotherapist and military wife, Nicky Clarke, suggested Malone film there during a deployment to Afghanistan (Military Wives 2012, 149–50), the producers Twenty Twenty instead filmed a 'military wives' series at Royal Marines Base Chivenor and in Plymouth, while Clarke at Catterick still formed her own base choir.<sup>3</sup>

The 2011 documentary presented the choir as a way to inform the public about the hardships of 'military wives', and as a space where women could support each other through the anxieties of deployments – support which in base and regimental culture provides the fabric of 'the communal life of the "regimental family"' during operational tours (Hyde 2016, 3). The documentary mixed rehearsal scenes with interviews where women discussed social barriers between wives based on husbands' ranks and regiments, the problems of being a family's only resident carer, the difficulties of managing their husbands' emotions about deployment, and their own 'mixture of emotions' as men began to deploy. Many women and even some children spoke of fearing the so-called 'knock on the door' (see Hyde 2016, 7–8)

that notifies relatives of death. Malone, evaluating their confidence, considers that ‘what they don’t do is put emotion into their singing, because they’re too frightened to. For very good reasons, they’ve clammed up’. The second episode sees the choir record a song for Forces radio (‘This is a chance for them to sing to their men in Afghanistan’), expand into Plymouth, perform at Plymouth’s Armed Forces Day and, finally, sing at a passing-out dinner at Sandhurst, where Malone aims to persuade ‘the military establishment’ more bases should support wives’ choirs. A passing-out officer gives the series its first mention of heroism in remarking ‘the girlfriends and wives are the real kind of unsung heroes when we go away, and they’re the strength behind us, they keep us doing what they do’.

The third episode establishes, in a tense narrative typical of performance-based reality TV, that ‘with the men soon coming home, Gareth has just eight weeks to prepare his choir for the performance of a lifetime’, the televised Festival of Remembrance and 90th anniversary of the Royal British Legion (RBL) at the Royal Albert Hall. Malone commissions an original song by Paul Mealor (composer of a cantata for that year’s Royal Wedding), with lyrics based on keepsakes women and husbands had exchanged. Most of these were letters – historically as well as contemporaneously a structural emotional connection between ‘home’ and the front (Roper 2009) – and one Chivenor woman’s narrative suggests how contributors to the lyrics negotiated private emotion and expectations about ‘appropriate’ discourses of public commemoration:

You could have got a lyricist to write words for us, and I’m sure they would have been very emotional, but this way the words told it how it is from our perspective.

I didn’t give any letters in, as most of mine at that time were about the dog!

(Military Wives 2012, 209)

Another keepsake, a silver bracelet engraved 'Wherever you are, you will always be in my heart' (attributed to Mahatma Gandhi), inspired the song's title and first line, before a chorus ending 'Light up the darkness, my prince of peace / may the stars shine all around you, may your courage never cease'. This echoed the Christian and adventuresome "'high" diction' (Fussell 2013 [1975], 24) of early WW1 but also the notion of the military as a 'force for peace' (Duncanson 2013) in Afghanistan.

Bereavement and the fear of bereavement continue to mark the third episode, with some Chivenor men returning but the Plymouth troops still away and several more Plymouth wives being bereaved or learning their husbands have been seriously injured. Three women start crying at Plymouth when Malone introduces the song and bracelet, and one, Katie, has to leave the room. As she tells the camera:

It sounds like it's from everyone's hearts, and it just brings everything into perspective, it doesn't matter what you're doing during the day, someone's loved one is out there working in this war. When they should be at home with their families, and they're not.

Yet by the end a combined choir of 100 Plymouth and Chivenor wives (Military Wives 2012, 169) performs, to triumphant reception, at the Royal Albert Hall to an audience including war veterans, their own husbands and most of the immediate Royal Family. Malone summarises the series' legacy:

These are women who, because of their natural tendency to sort of get on with it stoically, just hide their light under a bushel, and I think that's a terrible shame. You know, they have so much to be proud of, so much to celebrate. And I don't think there has ever been a forum to celebrate military wives before, and we just

made one. And it felt really really fantastic to – I mean, an honour to be part of that. And music did that. You know. Not me, not them, music did that for them.

The classical record-label Decca released ‘Wherever You Are’ as a Christmas single in aid of SSAFA and the Poppy Appeal, becoming a rare Christmas number one not associated with ITV/SyCo’s *The X Factor*. Their album, *In My Dreams*, topped the UK album charts for Mothers’ Day 2012, with a title-track Meador called ‘the story of a soldier out on duty who’s just lying there dreaming of the person who he left behind, and the woman that he’s singing to sings back’ (Brown 2012). Choral singing aggregated many women’s voices, all military ‘wives’, into this one character. The song gained emotional authenticity not only from the Wives but also through its male vocalist, Jonjo Kerr – a serving soldier and *X Factor* 2011 finalist who would shortly deploy to Afghanistan. Its video included family photos from some Wives and Kerr. The Choir participated in the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee and (with Kerr) the next Festival of Remembrance, released a second album (*Stronger Together*), and featured in a BBC recap documentary at Christmas 2012.

Their recorded songs – both originals and covers of pop songs, musical standards and hymns – dealt consistently with separation, reunion and emotional support. Some songs they covered already had military associations,<sup>4</sup> while others were well-known pop standards about separation or emotional repair but also helped depict wives’ emotional labour<sup>5</sup> – the invisible work that the Choir(s) wanted to point out to civilians. Some of the Choir’s public representation, however, might also have framed the women as symbolic not active figures: for instance, juxtaposing ‘My husband protects Queen and country’ and ‘I sing for Queen and country’ on the front and back of their T-shirts in some public appearances (Military Wives 2012, 293), organised expression of patriotism and monarchic loyalty into a binary that might have emphasised gendered difference over the work military wives actually performed.



The Military Wives book (Military Wives 2012), published in November 2012 with 25 women's interwoven first-person narratives, expanded public representation of the Choir(s) well beyond the BBC narrative (which only one third covers). Part 1 narrated how the women became 'military wives' and the military's impact of the military on their family; Part 2 began with Clarke and Catterick before covering Chivenor–Plymouth; Part 3 described the Choir's mass-media activities after *The Choir*; and Part 4 returned to the grassroots with narratives from women who had formed or joined choirs at other bases after hearing about the Choir. The book clearly presented the grassroots choirs and MWCF, not celebrity, as the Choir's most important achievement. To what extent, however, would these messages reach the civilian public, especially as Britain concluded major operations in Afghanistan and the WW1 centenaries approached?

### **Popular militarism, Remembrance culture and the Military Wives Choir(s) at the approaching Centenary**

An interdependence of popular culture and militarism, mediated through the Remembrance poppy as well as direct depiction of the Iraq/Afghanistan wars, had been visible in British entertainment since 2006 as British troop commitments in Helmand increased and numbers of killed and wounded personnel increased (Rech et al. 2015, 541). Government and civil society both shaped this discursive space around a 'language of sacrifice and heroism' (Ware 2010a, 147). 2007, for instance, saw the formation of Help for Heroes or H4H (a fundraising charity with a 'strictly non-political and non-critical' (Imber and Fraser 2011, 386) stance on specific operations) and an *Independent on Sunday* campaign to renew the 'military covenant' (Ware 2010b, 322), but also a prime-ministerial initiative to institutionalise supportive sentiments into a national Armed Forces Day – and away from criticisms that

government had not provided enough body armour or helicopters for the military (Ware 2010a).

Mass media and other institutions meanwhile contributed to public representations of the military and heroism in spheres including popular music, sport, mass-market publishing and even groceries – with supermarkets selling not one but several military charity food brands (including ‘Eggs for Soldiers’ and a range of ‘Forces Sauces’) in 2013–14 (Tidy 2015).

English and Scottish Premier League football clubs started displaying poppies on their shirts at Remembrance weekend in 2008 – contested by many Celtic fans and by the Derry-born Irish footballer James McClean (Mullen 2015, 5) – and the Football League dedicated its 2009–10 season to H4H. The Rugby Football Union, which already held annual inter-Services matches at Twickenham, invited wounded soldiers to internationals and gave prominent public roles to the two military princes, William and Afghanistan veteran Harry. Dozens of mass-market memoirs about Iraq/Afghanistan – hardly ever about non-combat arms – were published in the 2000s and 2010s (Woodward and Jenkins 2012b). *The Sun* launched annual ‘Military Awards’ in 2008 and from 2009 broadcast them on ITV with the same presenters (Amanda Holden and Philip Schofield) as some of ITV’s biggest entertainment events (Dixon 2012, 13). Repatriations of dead British troops through Wootton Bassett simultaneously became a (tabloid-mediated) public remembrance spectacle in 2007–10 until the nearby RAF base was closed and a less public repatriation route organised, with the town officially renamed ‘Royal’ Wootton Bassett in 2011 (King 2010; Jenkins et al. 2012).<sup>6</sup> The entertainment–military–commemorative complex was thus firmly established before the Choir(s) formed, tied closely to legitimisation of the monarchy as well as military and state.

Within this complex, television and record labels collaborated in producing a new patriotic popular music, most visible during the ceremonial, ritual seasons of Remembrance and Christmas. This differed from the tradition of Forces bands releasing commercial brass-band albums because it was directly integrated into the pop charts and pop music television. Before the Choir, another label had already signed The Soldiers, a trio of three serving British soldiers who released their first light-entertainment album *Coming Home* in October 2009 (with a similar musical mix to the Choir albums) to benefit the Army Benevolent Fund. They performed the national anthem, though not in uniform, at the Royal Variety Performance that December. Their first single 'Coming Home' addressed its chorus to waiting relatives and partners; their second, 'A Soldier's Christmas Letter', described a soldier deployed overseas at Christmas, and its first verse depicted military wives' emotional labour (where 'she takes comfort from a letter he wrote / she keeps them close, she cries alone').

The Soldiers released another album every October (pre-Remembrance) between 2010 and 2012, with heroism, letters and separation all consistent themes: the title of their 2010 album *Letters Home*, for instance, was inspired by the last letter of Guardsman Tony Downes, who had died in Helmand in 2007 (BBC 2010). In 2011 they recorded that year's Poppy Appeal single, covering the Bee Gees' 'I've Gotta Get a Message to You'. Their lyrics and even the production history of 'Letters Home' anticipated 'Wherever You Are', and indeed Clarke's Catterick choir had sung with The Soldiers on ITV's *This Morning* in 2010 (Military Wives 2012, 157, 166). Yet assessing The Soldiers' songs as gendered narratives of security reveals noticeable differences from the Military Wives' recordings, with The Soldiers permitted more explicitness about death.<sup>7</sup> 'Coming Home', for instance, saluted 'the ones God couldn't save' and stated that 'from across this changing world' – echoes of the discourse of new security threats making it essential for Britain to fight in Afghanistan? – 'we live in the hope that you come back home'. Another song on *Letters Home*, 'Great British Hero', depicted 'each

regiment' saluting at its soldiers' graves, flags 'fly[ing] half-mast [...] as we remember who keeps our land free', and stated in its chorus that 'just one day is not enough' for remembrance of British military pride and heroism. Its middle eight contained a phrase from Edward Elgar's *Nimrod*, played on national commemorative occasions including Whitehall's annual Remembrance parade (Smith 2001, 582). Troops' possible fate overseas could be voiced by The Soldiers but was silent in recordings by the Wives, as present as it was in the Choir's own thoughts, their listeners' minds and the rationale of their chosen charities.

Co-operation with the RBL and H4H, alongside featuring authentic members of the military in light entertainment and the long-standing practice of sending professional pop musicians to visit the front, helped the mid-2000s UK pop industry take a patriotic turn (Baker 2014). The RBL started endorsing charity singles in 2008 and holding public Poppy Appeal launches, including pop performances, in central London. ITV's main talent-show, *The X Factor*, embraced Remembrance and H4H in 2008 by having its finalists record Mariah Carey's 'Hero' for H4H, and did the same (with David Bowie's 'Heroes') in 2010. Contestants and judges wore poppies – often jewelled not paper (Rawi 2011) – during shows broadcast on Remembrance weekend,<sup>8</sup> and during the *X Factor* results on Remembrance Sunday 2014, contestants and a children's choir sang Take That's 'Never Forget' before thousands of poppies on a huge digital screen.<sup>9</sup> This went well beyond the 2011 narrative around Kerr to tie the entire show into British popular militarism and Remembrance culture. Thus, although the press framed the Choir in opposition to the ex-*X Factor* girl-group Little Mix in constructing the 2011 'race to Christmas number one', the entertainment–military–commemorative complex encompassed both.

The characteristic sound of this 'new British patriotic popular music' (Baker 2012) usually involved choral singing or musical-theatre song, often with a military band, otherwise hints

of militarised pipes or drums and/or quotations of music associated with military mourning and commemoration. While its affinity with reality television contests was distinctive to the present, its ingredients existed in prior connections between popular music and the British state. Even the ‘charity single’ itself – dating back to the 1980s, but until the late 2000s usually themed around famine, AIDS and victims of disaster/crime rather than military heroism – related to the state insofar as it suggested social need should be met through individual benevolence *not* state provision (Robinson 2012), a criticism also made of the state’s own reliance on charity for veteran care (Mumford 2012). ‘Heroism’ discourse helped mobilise public support to alleviate pressure on the state.

The British pop industry and monarchy cemented its contemporary linkages in 2002 at the Queen’s Golden Jubilee, with the internationally-televised ‘Party at the Palace’. This, and its mix of genres, represented concessions to popular/youth culture that helped present the monarchy as a subject of broad public consensus, averting the desacralisation that had threatened it after the Palace’s initially unemotional response to Princess Diana’s death in 1997 (Duffett 2004). The Diamond Jubilee concert in 2012 (involving the Choir among 25 pop, rap, musical-theatre and classical artists) was similar, with *The Times* commenting:

It is unlikely that the Queen requested a duet by Jessie J and Will.i.am of The Black Eyed Peas’ vapid but effective party starter I Got A Feeling for her big day, but by allowing it to happen she demonstrated an astute understanding of the public mood. (Hodgkinson 2012)

These representations had longer-term backgrounds, however, in past wars’ popular militarism.

‘Popular militarism’, now commonplace in Critical Military Studies, used to appear more often in literature on Victorian/Edwardian/WW1 Britain (and contemporaneous Europe) than on the present; yet Critical Military Studies has been slower to historicise contexts of popular militarism than spatialise them. Popular militarism’s longer-term legacies are, however, directly relevant to understanding the imaginative and emotional investments that present-day popular militarism invites from military community-members and the wider public (Dawson 1994). Indeed, tabloids construct such links themselves by, for example, labelling the opera soloist Katherine Jenkins a ‘Forces’ sweetheart’ because of her performances for troops: this nickname originally belonged to Vera Lynn, the singer who in British popular memory ‘embodies nostalgic constructions of World War II as a good war’ (Baade 2006, 36).

Contemporary popular militarism is not, however, a continuity or legacy of the past; rather, it consciously re-presents (selected elements of) the past to produce new meanings in interaction with contemporary politics (Wilson 2014; Andrews 2015). Critical and pacifist accounts argue that past–present mediations in British popular militarism predominantly operate to depoliticise the military through a nostalgia which claims unquestionable public consensus around the military’s existence, its standing and the justness of the wars it pursues. Projected back into the past, these gain weight by evoking historical narratives of wartime cohesion across socio-economic and political divides, in which WW1 stands as the Great Sacrifice and WW2 as an equally depoliticised People’s War (Ware 2010a; Tidy 2015; Basham 2016).

The Choir did not release recorded music during the centenary year of 2014.<sup>10</sup> They did however perform at militarised public events (including the first international Invictus Games for wounded service personnel) and participated in a prestigious national commemoration,

the WW1-themed Prom (alongside the cast and puppets of the play *War Horse*). Beyond the Proms' underlying presence as 'a great, long-lasting British "tradition"' in national cultural life (Cannadine 2008, 318), the so-called 'War Horse Prom' on 3 August, one day before the centenary of Britain entering WW1, contained even more symbolic layers. The Prom gave the Choir, which usually performed pop and light-classical music, its most challenging musical repertoire yet, in a setting based on making musical virtuosity and appreciation of high-art music accessible to the national public (Whitworth 2014).<sup>11</sup>

Another BBC documentary (*The Choir: New Military Wives*, shown at Christmas 2014) depicted the choirs' expansion since 2011 and the Prom's production history. This bridged the reality-television and popular-history genres when the Prom's musical consultant (musician and historian Hannah French) revealed that the WW1 home front too had contained what were now being called military wives' choirs, including the 'Tipperary Clubs' (after the song 'It's A Long Way To Tipperary') founded by the wife of the First Sea Lord, Admiral Jellicoe.<sup>12</sup> These choirs provided 'vital' support, French told *The Times*, for women who 'became military wives overnight' when their husbands were conscripted and 'didn't know where to go with their worries' (Whitworth 2014) – a clear parallel with the modern-day choirs. Women in WW1 – though arguably mothers even more than wives – had indeed 'effectively underwrit[ten] the war effort' by shouldering the emotional burden of separation and sustaining troops' morale through long-distance communication (Roper 2009, 6). Yet WW1 was a different conflict in terms of the structure of participation, the nature of combat and the social politics of the home front. Lucy Noakes, indeed, relates the Clubs to upper-class British women's policing of working-class women's leisure and sexuality: women occupied with choral singing, it was thought, would not be tempted to spend time in immoral activities and the public house (Noakes 2006, 45–6). This dimension of the Clubs was

smoothed over by *The Times* but suggests that contextualising militarisation, gender, class and musical cultures is just as complex for present-day Critical Military Studies and the social history of WW1.

Maggie Andrews, discussing images of the WW1 home front in pre-centenary Britain, observes that representations of British soldiers' and civilians' duty and sacrifice in 1914–18 created a 'slippage in the popular imagination between the First World War and contemporary wars in Iraq and Afghanistan' (Andrews 2014, 233; see also McCartney 2014; Wilson 2014; Tidy 2015). Andrews linked this particularly to public unease about elites wasting young men's lives in an unpopular war (a revisionist narrative of WW1 well embedded in British public memory) and to the appeal of nostalgic representations of togetherness under austerity. Yet the same slippage simultaneously marked expressions of militarism in government and civil society (Tidy 2015; Basham 2016), illustrating the 'indeterminacy' (Rech et al. 2015, 53) of fixing one single meaning on to public rememberings of contemporary or historic war.

Andrews further suggests, with important resonances for understanding the public presentation of the Choir(s), that 'the idea of the Home Front ha[d] become blurred with Remembrance' as the centenary approached, making '[t]he pain of temporary separation for families involved in war [...] intimately entwined with the pain of permanent separation caused by bereavement' (Andrews 2014, 243). This implies they might represent two separate domains of emotion and memory. Yet what the Wives' narratives so often suggested – in more depth when there was more space for their own words – and what a public unconnected to the military did not experience as viscerally was that a temporary separation becoming a permanent separation is precisely what family members fear. At its most acute,



when soldiers are prevented from communicating home after a fatality (so that the military's own liaison officers notify next-of-kin), an entire base community experiences the same dread (Hyde 2016, 5–6). Overcoming such intensely-felt emotions to sustain house and home during deployments and help reintegrate deployed troops back into domestic life was part of the 'unsung heroism' attributed to the choirs' women, even as their recorded music glorified the deployed male military hero.

### **The gendered politics of heroism, emotion and celebrity**

Media representations of the Choir(s) nevertheless rarely made heroism an *explicit* theme, either of the women's psychological and communal triumphs or of their husbands'/partners' service and deployment. The Military Wives book foregrounded wives' practical problems and the social solidarity women built through the choirs. It first mentions heroism in an account of the 2011 Festival of Remembrance, where one woman remembers an 'elderly man' saying: 'I wish my wife was alive to hear you sing. She was a military wife for many years, an unsung heroine. Thank you for giving her story a voice' (Military Wives 2012, 210). A surviving, aged male veteran thus confers heroism on the wives. Yet the women still show anxiety over whether their status matches that of the deployed servicemen, with one remembering thinking at a prime-ministerial reception for troops: 'We're in the same room as the Prime Minister and he's brimming with pride about what we've achieved. How can that possibly balance with what these guys have been doing in Libya?' (Military Wives 2012, 259). *The Choir*, meanwhile, had emphasised confidence and emotion, with narrative arcs following whether selected participants would overcome their personal struggles and triumph in performance. It thus paralleled narratives of television talent-shows and other reality-TV formats based on personal transformation, where 'the role of "ordinary" people as performers

and/or celebrities’ (Holmes 2006, 8) and ‘the tension over an impossibly knowable “what will happen next”’ (Skeggs and Wood 2008, 559) are both integral to the form.

*The Choir*’s apparently-unanticipated outcome, in which amateurs with no/little prior choral experience ended up with a professional recording contract, certainly resembled the climax of talent formats in which the winner (as voted by viewers or experts) receives a contract or other opportunity, while other competitors are regularly voted off. In building up to performance for the Queen, the third episode’s narrative directly echoed *Britain’s Got Talent* (whose winner performs at the Royal Variety Show), especially when Malone or the voiceover reminded viewers of the pressure to perform to one’s highest potential under the royal gaze.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, however, *The Choir*’s achievement narrative was collective not competitive (with no eliminations and very little depiction even of competitive audition). This distanced it from individualised talent-shows but still unfolded within the so-called ‘demotic turn’ (Turner 2006) in producing contemporary celebrity through reality TV.

Feminist perspectives on the construction of gender, class and self through reality television suggest British reality TV depends on ‘attaching [...] good and bad behaviour [...] to practices, bodies and people’ as signs of value, making it a successor to other gendered, classed and racialised disciplining practices including the etiquette manual and the women’s magazine (Skeggs and Wood 2008, 560–1). Many documentary reality formats, including makeover series, dieting series and poverty documentaries (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006; Inthorn and Boyce 2010; Allen et al. 2014), achieve this through judgemental editorial interventions that invite feelings of distance and disgust, not through *The Choir*’s empowering, therapeutic positioning. In the wider UK television landscape *The Choir* was

nevertheless their counterpart, dramatising ‘good’ moral values of patriotism and respectability.

*The Choir*’s very foregrounding of emotion, ‘heroically’ suppressed by military wives, might itself characterise reality television and contemporary celebrity. Within a so-called ‘confessional’ turn in contemporary Western culture (Nunn and Biressi 2010), all reality formats at least partly depend on participants releasing emotions during observational filming or monologues-to-camera – ‘a true sign of direct access to the authentic’ in reality-TV narrative conventions (Aslama and Pantti 2006, 167). *The Choir*’s emotional arc was that military wives had become so accustomed to suppressing emotions that they needed the choir space to be able to release them and sing emotionally enough to achieve their aim of ‘being heard’. A collective narrative in the *Military Wives* book also describes women’s emotional shutdown when their partners deploy:

When they go, we struggle to put a brave face on it. We don’t want to distract him; we’ve heard the saying, ‘if his head’s at home, he’ll struggle out there.’ So we accept, and are even glad, that as he prepares to go he seems to shut us out of his mind. When he’s gone, we shake ourselves out of our misery and get on with it: we feed the children, walk the dog, go to our jobs, all the time blocking out thoughts and fears about what he is facing. (*Military Wives* 2012, 1–2)

The military, indeed, relies on such emotional labour to sustain regimental cultures and troops’ effectiveness (Nicholson 2009; Atwood 2013; Gray 2016; Hyde 2016).

The idea of sacrifice implied in this collective voice is, in differently gendered ways, tightly bound up with notions of military heroism (Elshtain 1991). Yet, in *The Choir*, the women’s

climactic Festival of Remembrance performance demonstrates they have overcome their ‘natural tendency to sort of get on with it stoically’ as military wives: they have supported their husbands through deployment *and* expressed enough emotion to triumph in this ceremonial, prestigious, semi-sacred space.<sup>14</sup> Rather than assuming that supporting a household single-handedly and managing the anxieties of pre-deployment, deployment and return *will* produce a ‘natural tendency’ to stoicism, however, one could instead ask *how* the subjectivity that the military expects troops’ partners to show (suppressing their own emotions, not worrying troops while they are deployed) has been produced through command, tradition and social expectation (Nicholson 2009; Jervis 2011).

Moreover, if the women succeeded in being heard through the choir, and through their consequent show business activities, what if anything would they be heard *to say*? The practical difficulties of military families and partners – many mentioned in the Military Wives book (such as the instability of housing, the damage to women’s careers when families move to a new base, and regimental/rank boundaries affecting women’s friendships), while others even remain invisible there – were not part of their recorded songs or even most national media interviews (though sometimes more visible in local newspapers). These are political matters in the sense that, as recognised matters of military policy, they can be struggled over and *could*, potentially, be changed by the military (Woodward and Winter 2007, 40) – whether or not military partners making representations to regimental welfare structures or SSAFA would consider themselves as making ‘political’ demands. Another ‘political’ dimension of the Choir(s), in the sense that it could be contested and negotiated, was the very question of who might be counted among, or experience the structural problems of, ‘military wives’.

## Who is a military wife?

The notion of a ‘military wives choir’ relies on multiple gendered assumptions about who serves in the military, who their romantic partners are and what their intimate relationships are like. Its implication that all members are women and are married to their partner (not cohabiting) reproduces not just a traditional gender binary and (especially in the Royal Marines, where women could not serve until 2016) heteronormativity, but also a model of respectability where any relationship worth recognising must be enshrined in marriage. UK military policy preserves this model by tying Service Family Accommodation eligibility to marriage (or civil partnership), causing unmarried couples added difficulties during deployments (Higate and Cameron 2004, 211; Keeling et al. 2015, 293–4). Indeed, so tightly is housing bound to marriage that a non-serving spouse whose relationship ends must leave service accommodation within 93 days (Gray 2016, 6).

The Choir(s) nevertheless included both wives and girlfriends from the outset – while the Catterick choir had been named ‘a “WAGS” [wives and girlfriends] choir, so that it was inclusive as possible’ (Military Wives 2012, 161). This matched the choirs’ ethos of bridging rather than solidifying social boundaries between women, including the often problematic ‘dichotomy of “married/single”’ (Higate and Cameron 2004, 213) within military culture. During *The Choir*, when Malone introduces the idea at Chivenor, he suggests naming them:

The RMB Chivenor Military Wives’ Choir. Now I know that some of you aren’t wives, but if we have the RMB Military WAGs’ Choir it says something very different, I think.

The ‘WAGs’ allusion, which Malone expects the women and audience to understand, refers to an acronym popularised by UK tabloids in 2006 to describe the wives and girlfriends of the

England men's football team, who had unusually accompanied them to the World Cup (Bullen 2014). 'WAGs' became the new name for an archetype known earlier in the decade by the label (from the title of an ITV melodrama) 'footballers' wives' (Clayton and Harris 2004). England's 'WAGs', including the celebrity pop-stars Victoria Beckham and Cheryl Cole, attracted paparazzi attention throughout England's disappointing tournament and were blamed by some fans and journalists for the poor results (Vincent et al. 2011) – an echo of the idea that women on the battlefield would impede male soldiers' combat, suggesting that ideas about sporting and military cohesion remain, as in the 19th century, mutually constitutive. WAGs, glamour-models and reality-TV stars are aggregated into a common category of unruliness, excess and shame in contemporary British practices of producing social identities through value judgements about consumption and the body (Skeggs 2005; Allen and Mendick 2013; Bullen 2014).

While within the Catterick base community the informal acronym might have reassured women about the choir's inclusivity, entering UK televised entertainment as a 'Military WAGs Choir' would have put the group in a very different, class-marked and class-stigmatised social category compared to 'military wives' and might have impeded the messages that members wanted to use their spotlight to convey. The effort to distance the Choir from reality-TV stars' 'excessive', working-class femininity permitted them to embody a collective respectable deportment and cultural competence appropriate to the formal, elite settings where they would perform (a Sandhurst commissioning dinner and a televised performance before the Royal Family during a Remembrance festival), though even then in December 2011 certain tabloid columnists attempted to create controversy over the soloist Sam Stevenson's many visible tattoos. An RBL spokesperson also implied the Choir belonged to a separate category of fame from young female pop soloists when rebutting

criticisms that the RBL's Poppy Appeal launches were sentimentalising and commercialising the campaign, saying 'Yes we do have Alesha Dixon and Pixie Lott, but we also have the Military Wives Choir, and the band of the Grenadier Guards' (Furness 2012).

Military wives choirs appear to have agreed 'wives' as a category including any woman with a connection to the military who faces a military family's anxieties and who would benefit from the choirs' interpersonal and practical support. The MWCF website now lists six groups into which potential members fall, some significantly extending beyond the literal meaning of 'military wife' (MWCF 2015a). Female soldiers and veterans – a category hardly visible in *The Choir* even though some of those very women had military experience – are here incorporated into grassroots choirs, closer to the increasingly gender-equitable military of contemporary MOD policy (Woodward and Winter 2007). Troops' immediate relatives and even civilian welfare employees can also join (another potential social bridging move within base communities), though strikingly there is no reference to widows. Some widowed women have however joined choirs, like one contributor to the MWCF website, who wrote that when a choir formed at Winchester 'I was so jealous – until I was told that as a widow, and veteran I was also entitled to join [...] My goodness me the support and friendship is amazing, something I thought I had lost'. In 2015 the choir elected her chair (MWCF 2015b). While military wives choirs have helped women through bereavement, their media presentation did not foreground this as a social function, concentrating instead on the heroism of emotional labour for troops who are still alive.

Different modes of public representation varied in how much homogeneity/heterogeneity they ascribed the choirs. Televised commemorations and song lyrics presented the most homogenous, collective voice (as, deliberately, did the collective framing narratives introducing each section of the *Military Wives* book). *The Choir* incorporated some women's

family circumstances and personal life-stories but did not for instance depict any in paid labour outside the home. The *Military Wives* book and many local newspaper articles, however, showed many participants in the documentary, plus other women in other choirs, were employed in sectors including care, teaching, and civilian organisations connected to the military. Indeed, while the documentary implied the women lacked any support before the choir, several narratives in the book referred to paid employment as itself helping women cope with military family life (Military Wives 2012, 7, 78, 143).

Women's military service itself was invisible in *The Choir*, but a major theme in *New Military Wives*, which featured choir members including an RAF medic, Sarah, and an Army physiotherapist, Skye. The former narrative strand, however, ends up signalling the incompatibility of wifedom/motherhood and military service for Sarah, whose husband John is also in the RAF. The emotion of rehearsing 'Home They Brought Her Warrior Dead' becomes the 'catalyst' for Sarah's decision to leave service: 'What I imagined in that story was John, as that lady, sat there, with the kids. I couldn't put John and my family in the position that the lady is in.' The music of 1914 and the affective identification of singing its lyrics thus appears, in the narrative, to split apart the contemporary dual role of servicewoman and wife/mother, reinscribing an older gendered separation of battle and home front that overshadowed the contemporaneous regendering of military participation in actual UK policy. Reconciling this scene's problematic implications as a public text with the family's agency in negotiating everyday militarisation and danger exemplifies the challenge for critical feminist scholarship in contextualising the everyday politics of militarisation.

## **Silences and exclusions**



Beyond potential internal stratifications within the Choir(s) that appeared through their documentaries and book – which choirs participated most in the national Choir, where Catterick might have stood in the founding narrative, how comfortably different choirs mixed together, and how the Choir managed the balance between mass participation and semi-professionalism as its show business engagements increased<sup>15</sup> – other possible stratifications were either not present or, in public, unseen. Choirs' members are explicitly gendered 'female' by the MWCF (MWCF 2015a); the military husband (married to a service-member) is either not anticipated to exist, not anticipated to need the choirs' support, or expected to seek it elsewhere. There are no 'wives' of female soldiers; male soldiers' male partners; bisexual women married to/cohabiting with men; or any transgender partners/troops, in these representations of the choirs. While the representations do not explicitly exclude diverse sexualities or gender identities, they nevertheless render them invisible, fixing the choirs within a framework of heteronormativity. Sarah Bulmer (2013, 142) suggests that although the MOD formally opened military service to gays and lesbians in 2000, its insistence on sexuality as a private matter continues to render sexual diversity invisible.

The community depicted by the most widely-circulated visual representations of the Choir was also a space of whiteness, with almost all women featured in *The Choir* and Choir music videos (including all *The Choir*'s individual interviewees) appearing to be white; a few black British troops and wives are seen in backgrounds during the documentaries. One growing subcategory of 'military wives', those of migrant Commonwealth soldiers (especially from Fiji and the Caribbean), faced specific challenges arising from their and/or partners' lack of UK nationality (Ware 2012) but were not a specific cause in overall MWCF material.<sup>16</sup> Individual choirs did however speak up for migrant wives: the Shorncliffe choir's founder, for instance, hoped from the outset to involve Nepalese wives of soldiers from the Royal

Gurkha Regiment at Folkestone (Chopra 2012), and 4–5 Nepalese women did join (*Folkestone Herald* 2014). Choirs' grassroots activities were informed to at least some extent by their bases' localised geopolitics.

Fully contextualising the Choir(s) also requires acknowledging the military's most constitutive elements as an institution: its inescapable status as 'an institution mandated to apply violence' (Basham 2013, 3), and the corollary that its members risk death and serious injury. The suggestion that news photographs of British soldiers during the Iraq/Afghanistan wars both ascribed the soldier a 'hero position' and mediated this 'through a set of contemporary anxieties about legitimate and illegitimate violence' (Woodward et al. 2009, 218, 221) hints at the stakes of representing the wider contexts of 'military wives' lives. Women's and some children's fears for deployed troops, and the reverberations of Plymouth-based 42 Commando's losses, heavily overshadowed the 2011 documentary. Interestingly, the 2014 documentaries – made as British forces were closing their remaining bases in Afghanistan, when deaths had decreased but not ended – depicted the risks to personnel more explicitly than 2011 (one soldier, packing his kit-bag, shows his girlfriend 'ballistic pants', designed to protect troops against genital injuries from IEDs; one choir member is a physiotherapist, seen treating a male soldier's injured but whole body). The deepest silences in the choirs' public representations instead surrounded the forms of violence, mandated and unmandated, in which service personnel could be implicated.

*The Choir* showed troops undertaking fitness and assault-course training, and showing off weapons and vehicles at 'family day' (a sequence even including one brief shot of a young fair-haired boy learning to look through a rifle-sight), but the conditions and nature of counter-insurgency and combat in Afghanistan – what troops were there to *do* – were not

described. Outside the text altogether is any unsanctioned violence against Afghans by British troops, though one well-publicised case (the ‘Marine A’ shooting) occurred in September 2011 (while *The Choir* was still being filmed), involving a 42 Commando company (Walklate and McGarry 2015, 192). The ‘controlled aggression’ between male troops that several Army memoirists describe during post-deployment ‘decompression’ in Cyprus (Woodward and Jenkins 2012a, 156), before troops return to home bases and families, is invisible in *The Choir*’s references to Cyprus and decompression while Chivenor wives wait for their homecoming. The viewer would not hear of sexual harassment in the military, of homoerotic bonding rituals among male troops (Basham 2013, 106–9),<sup>17</sup> nor, most relevant of all in a collection of texts about ‘military wives’, of the disproportionately high rates of domestic violence and abuse inflicted by service personnel (Basham 2013, 85; Gray 2016).

Harriet Gray’s study of British military responses to domestic abuse argues that the military’s gendered ‘public/private divide’ is driven by ‘the discourse of *operational effectiveness*’ (Gray 2016, 5, emphasis original). This requires ‘the reification of the private sphere as a sacred space which must be protected by military force’ when motivating troops to fight or explaining why the military exists, but simultaneously collapses the divide by providing (some) facilities for troops’ (institutionally-recognised) family-members and expecting relatives to displace lives, careers and education when personnel’s posts change (Gray 2016, 5–6). The divide’s ‘collapse’ could sometimes permit welfare services to intervene quickly in abuse but also enabled the military to ‘close ranks’ around abusers, leaving survivors unsupported (Gray 2016, 8–9). The all-determining function of ‘operational effectiveness’ is the reverse side of the military’s dependence on intimate partners as emotional workers holding families together. Recognising how deeply emotion is part of military socialisation

and recognising the military extends this socialisation to families as well as troops (Nicholson 2009) reveals what structures produce the emotional ‘stoicism’ that *The Choir* challenged its ‘unsung heroes’ to overcome.

## Conclusion

The entertainment–military–commemorative complex that the Choir(s) entered in 2011 was deeply politicised even though – because – it set military heroism and public support for troops outside the boundaries of politics, contestation and dissent (Ware 2010a; Tidy 2015; Millar 2016). These representations formed so intensively gendered a discursive framework that even UK press coverage of deployed servicewomen’s deaths could ‘alienate and distance them from the battlefield’ through rhetoric emphasising their emotional and private lives, whereas tributes to male soldiers killed in similar incidents praised their professional and soldierly accomplishments (Ette 2013, 250) – backed up by a ‘concentration on male military service’ (Todman 2013, 25) that still marked much WW1 centenary commemoration. The UK military’s increasing gender integration thus did not overturn deeper gender binaries constructed around deployment and war.

A critical reading of public representations of the Choir(s) suggests an underlying hegemonic narrative of female emotional and domestic support for male military heroism remained resilient to the potential destabilising effects of women’s direct participation in British military deployments, always threatening to soften the more specific and material aspects of life as a military wife or partner to which the women involved in the national Choir wished to draw attention. Heteronormativity, class respectability and whiteness also structured the Choir’s collective public social identity. The choirs’ wider membership, and even the individual life histories of women heavily involved in the national Choir, was nevertheless

more complex – in terms of who the ‘military wives’ label actually included and of military families’ conditions of life.

Applying a ‘feminist curiosity’ towards militarisation and constructions of military heroism (Enloe 2015, 8) to the Choir(s) requires attention to the structural situations and everyday geopolitics of civilian partners in military communities as well as the negotiations, mediations and exclusions associated with the entertainment media and popular press.<sup>18</sup>

Civilian partners, especially women, hold a precarious position in the political economy of the British military, which acknowledges them programmatically as components of troops’ ‘operational effectiveness’ yet is structured so that partners’ and families’ wellbeing itself is never at the centre of welfare provision (Nicholson 2009; Gray 2016). It would perpetuate the denial of agency that ‘military wives’ and other civilian partners already faced if one reduced the choirs purely to how they were photographed and what they were booked to sing.<sup>19</sup>

The idea that the choirs’ everyday social and interpersonal functions are far more important than media performance or celebrity, indeed, suffuses both the *Military Wives* book and the MWCF website. The book, of all the media texts about the Choir(s), is the most substantial space where the women speak in their own words (though it too has been excerpted and editorialised for mass-market publication). On the MCWF website, meanwhile, news about television and recorded music is far outnumbered by reports of local choirs’ community concerts and newsletter items where women describe what joining a choir has meant to them. As Katherine Catchpole, a founding member of the televised Chivenor choir, writes about the Diamond Jubilee performance:

I wasn’t one of those who went on stage for the National Anthem, but we linked arms and formed our own little choir and sang it. There was a girl who came up to

us with her husband, and she was sobbing because he was going out to Afghan soon. She said we were her inspiration. I told her, 'Join the choir at your base. There is one. It will save you. You can be part of this. This is why we do it: to be together. It's not about performing.' Then I turned to her husband and said, 'You keep safe out there, and before you go, make sure she joins the choir.' (Military Wives 2012, 263)

What appears in showbusiness as the 'Military Wives Choir' is only part of a network of everyday music-making which can provide meaningful comfort, solace and solidarity, and which is embedded in the material space of each individual base community,<sup>20</sup> but which largely goes unseen by those who record, book, watch or buy music by the national face of the choir(s). Yet the Choir nevertheless *has* a public representation, constructed by the producers of records, television shows and public events who choose musicians with specific intentions based on which audiences they may appeal to, what images and histories they have, and what narratives producers consciously or less consciously wish to express. If the Choir had not resonated with constructions that already existed among the public, then – as The Soldiers' Gary Chilton suggested when reflecting on his group's emergence – their music would not have had the same commercial success.

Not only the Choir's first single, based on authentic letters between soldiers and partners, but also the entertainment industry's version of the choir as a whole, thus existed somewhere between the level of personal memory and that of symbolic representation, national commemoration and heroic discourse. The Choir's 'My husband protects Queen and country... I sing for Queen and country' T-shirts positioned them in the domain of patriotism and loyalty to the state and monarch, and of personal pride in such; yet the same video contained authentic family photographs, family letters, 'welcome home' posters, and home

videos of troops' return, which sometimes included flags and other patriotic symbols but were more often personal and intimate. Yet then again, when incorporated into a public text advertised with encouragement to buy the single 'and support our armed forces', these objects could not stay solely personal; they also contributed to a collage telling a story of who British troops and their 'wives' were, what they did, how their division of labour was gendered, and – in a framework where political speech about troops' heroism, sacrifice and duty provided ideological connective tissue joining expressions of popular militarism into an organic whole – who and what counted as heroic. For the individuals who contributed these items, at the time they contributed them, this was not a contradiction.

The militarisation process, through the Choir(s), reveals itself as the negotiation of that contradiction – and militarism, perhaps, as the uncritical erasure of that contradiction altogether. The study of militarisation, and of the constructions of heroism that are among its most powerful symbolic resources, is now rich in critical analyses of 'popular militarism' and of the everyday spaces of military power, but with the drawback that, as Alexandra Hyde (2016, 8) suggests, 'analyses of militarisation [in media and public culture] often remain detached from [...] the lived experiences, social relations and embodied practices that make militarisation mobile, processual and transformative'. The Military Wives Choir(s) exist on both levels and cannot be reduced to either. Sustained ethnographic research with military wives choirs might yet add further depth to understanding how military wives, and other service partners, manage the emotional labour the military expects and how far, or otherwise, public discourses of heroism can provide any script for managing these demands.

Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter refers to ‘the Military Wives Choir’ as recording artists, ‘military wives choirs’ at base level, and ‘the Choir(s)’ for the complex of these distinct but related spheres. As this expanded after 2012, many choirs participated in local events but did not all join the Choir’s larger-scale public activities.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a Navy medic’s receiving the Military Cross for treating casualties under fire in Helmand had already placed at least one woman within the traditionally masculine space of battlefield heroism (King 2013, 396) – with the *Mirror* hailing her as ‘hero navy medic’ (*Daily Mirror* 2012). See also Duncanson (2013) on reconfigured militarised masculinities in peacebuilding and civil–military co-operation in Iraq/Afghanistan.

<sup>3</sup> Clarke/Catterick did not appear on screen, though Malone has credited their inspiration (Pukas 2012).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Joe Cocker’s ‘Up Where We Belong’ (from the *An Officer and a Gentleman* finale, where the uniformed naval officer returns to his girlfriend’s workplace and literally sweeps her off her feet), or the hymn ‘Eternal Father, Strong To Save’ (traditionally sung in prayer for military and civilian sailors).

<sup>5</sup> E.g. U2’s ‘With Or Without You’, or Coldplay’s ‘Fix You’.

<sup>6</sup> Some senior military figures were dismayed by the ‘mawkish’, in their eyes over-emotional, tone of Wootton Bassett and the popular press’s representation of Remembrance in general, and the Ministry of Defence’s arrangements for repatriating bodies after the closure of RAF Lyneham (when casualty flights would land at a different base, RAF Brize Norton) avoided routes that could invite any repeat of Wootton Bassett in a different town (Jenkins et al. 2012, 361–2). However, the commemorations can still be considered to have served the military’s interests in a wider sense, by adding legitimacy and gravitas to the notion that British military casualties in the War on Terror were a national sacrifice worthy of public grief. In helping to naturalise distinctions between whose lives in the War on Terror were



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‘grievable’ (see Butler 2009) by the British public (service personnel and British civilian victims of terrorism) and whose were not (the coalition’s direct and indirect casualties), these commemorations as relayed by the media still contributed to the militarisation of Remembrance even when they made military policy-makers uncomfortable.

<sup>7</sup> One Soldier, Gary Chilton, could even suggest they owed their success to ‘a lot of repatriation at Wootton Bassett, which struck a chord – the British public was looking for something like that music’ (*Hull Daily Mail* 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Likewise the BBC’s *Strictly Come Dancing*.

<sup>9</sup> Immersing performers in a visual field of Remembrance through full-backdrop digital screens is not uniquely British: e.g. the Maltese band Firelight performed their 2014 Eurovision Song Contest entry ‘Coming Home’ above a poppy-field on the stage under their feet. (The song’s video included Firelight’s male musicians as First World War soldiers/POWs, writing and sending sections of the lyrics as letters home to loved ones before the Armistice came around, closing with a poppy and the words ‘Remembering those who never came home’.) In 2015 (the Verdun centenary), France’s Eurovision representative Lisa Angell performed ‘N’oubliez pas’ (‘Don’t forget’) in the Eurovision final before a digital backdrop of a destroyed village, filling first with white doves then ranks of white-uniformed military drummers (mixed with identically-uniformed live drummers to subvert a rule about the number of on-stage performers). These performances therefore belong to a European, not just national, WW1 remembrance culture.

<sup>10</sup> They did release another Christmas single in 2015, covering The Proclaimers’ ‘I’m Gonna Be (500 Miles)’, to support of the wounded and homeless veterans’ charity Walking With The Wounded. This did not enter the Christmas Top 40; instead, number 1 (amid controversy over junior doctors’ working conditions) was another community-based charity single, ‘A Bridge Over You’ by Lewisham’s ‘NHS Choir’.

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<sup>11</sup> The concert included Frank Bridge's 'Summer'; 'Two Partsongs' and 'The Snow' by Elgar; Gustav Holst's settings of 'Ave Maria' and 'Home They Brought Her Warrior Dead'; Maurice Ravel's 'Le tombeau de Couperin'; and Adrian Sutton's 'War Horse Suite' (BBC 2014).

<sup>12</sup> 'Tipperary' was famed at home as a favourite of British troops – yet this was largely constructed by British press and sheet-music publishers, with troops themselves tiring of it before the end of 1914 (Hiley 1998, 66).

<sup>13</sup> The Festival of Remembrance (held on 12 November when the first episode aired on 7 November) was not part of the first two episodes' narrative – perhaps because producers did not yet know how it would go.

<sup>14</sup> Though not expressing *so* much emotion as to burst into tears on stage (Military Wives 2012, 187) – so even this triumph of emotion required emotional restraint.

<sup>15</sup> The book and documentary differ most vis-à-vis the Catterick choir – not in the show, yet recognised as 'the first Military Wives Choir, the Catterick choir' (Military Wives 2012, 51) throughout the book. The book also alludes to some further tensions after *The Choir*, including the embarrassment of half the women who travelled to the Diamond Jubilee suddenly being told stars had not left enough room on stage for them to fit, some new members bothering celebrities backstage in 2012, and rivalries when event organisers booked the Choir but requested only a limited number of members – besides domestic tensions when wives were 'very busy' during their husbands' post-deployment leave in 2011–12, and Decca not anticipating the childcare needs of a choir full of military wives (Military Wives 2012, 249–99).

<sup>16</sup> One contributor to the book was however a non-UK, non-Commonwealth (US) citizen who could not find employment while her husband's regiment was in Germany because her

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nationality prevented her working on the base and her language skills were not strong enough for German employment (Military Wives 2012, 104).

<sup>17</sup> *The Choir* and Malone's book both humorously portray wives' own drinking rituals, and Malone's inability to keep up (Malone 2012, 218–21).

<sup>18</sup> Compare how Amanda Chisholm, a feminist academic and former military medic, discusses the tension of reconciling the 'everyday militarism' of Remembrance culture and the simultaneous 'need to pay homage to my friends, family and my personal history' (Chisholm 2015).

<sup>19</sup> I am not certain I got this balance right when I first wrote about the Choir(s), in a 2012 blog-post on the politics of Remembrance culture (Baker 2014); parts of this conclusion flow from my initial second thoughts about balancing the Choir's showbusiness representation with the choirs' more complex grassroots activity (Baker 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Organising the choirs network around bases creates a much more inclusive structure than a network based on services/regiments, yet still leaves no institutional space for wives/partners of reservists – who would probably be welcomed by nearby bases' choirs but who may well live far from any base, giving them less access to military and quasi-military welfare services even though they too suffer practical and emotional anxieties during deployments. Thanks to Shaun Allan for this point.

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