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## 'Deeply odd': women veterans as critical feminist scholars

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### ABSTRACT

A series of conversations between two women veterans triggered a realization that our military service had been 'deeply odd'. Jointly authored by a historian and a social scientist, both have served in different services, through different conflicts, for different lengths and left for different reasons. Nonetheless, they have been fascinated by the parallels in their experiences of transition from military service to the academic researcher. This paper considers how their gendered military identity was constructed and negotiated such that they could not see their gendered experiences as 'deeply odd' when serving and can only see this now because their studies have challenged them to reflect critically. Women veterans are largely invisible in academia in contrast to the prominence of male veterans, particularly in military history and mainstream defence studies. Yet, the field of Critical Military Studies places women veteran researchers in a unique position of insider-outsider; still stained by our past compliance with the military institution – still outsiders – yet endeavouring now to find a new home as an 'insider', as critical feminist researchers. They find their identity as critical feminist scholars distances themselves from the military they want to remain engaged with and yet they are also viewed as 'deeply odd' themselves in the eyes of the critical feminist scholar community. Drawing on their personal experience, this paper argues that using the concept of the 'deeply odd' helps explore the dynamics of women veterans as critical feminist scholars with their insider-outsider status.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

*Hannah is a former Royal Navy officer and Sophy a former Royal Air Force officer.*<sup>1</sup>

*Hannah* There was a small lockable cage onboard for women's underwear. And I remember at the time thinking well at least they've thought of that, there's somewhere for us to hang them.

*Sophy* How nice of them.

*Hannah* Implying that they weren't going to be swiped by any men. But now of course I look back on it and think why on earth did we need to lock away our underwear.

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*Sophy* If you left your camera at the bar when you went to the loo or were buying a drink or something, you'd get back. There'd be a camera that you'd have to go and develop in those days, not digital or anything like that. And then you'd go to the chemist or send them away to Truprint or whatever. You'd get it back and there'd be a whole load of men's genitals. Cos they'd have taken pictures just because they thought it was hilarious. The guy who'd done it to me one time had left his wristwatch on. We managed to work out who it was and posted it on the noticeboard with his name and everything. But it wasn't because we were trying to get him into trouble. It was everyone thought it was funny, including us.

*Hannah* I totally remember someone who was bordering on hypothermia, he was not in a good way. We managed to get him a dry sleeping bag and yeh, I shared a sleeping bag with him just to keep him warm. And again, that wasn't at all weird. But I remember telling my mum about it later and her not really understanding the context of it and her finding that really strange.

*Sophy* So there were things that we did and we look back and think, that was a sensible thing to do but still seem odd from the outside. And then there were things that we don't really remember until we start talking about it that were deeply odd.

*Hannah* Yeh, yeh, really strange.

The genesis of this paper arose through conversations with each other during the course of our PhDs whereby we reflected on our military service and began to realize how 'deeply odd' some of these experiences had been and how we had normalized them at the time. Through these conversations, we caught a glimpse behind the stage-set of a military we thought we understood and began to explore remembered experiences differently. We have been most shocked by our, previously unacknowledged, recollections of the sexualized and gendered character of this institution. We were conscious of working in a male-dominated profession but while serving we had not recognized the extent to which the organization was and is pervaded by masculinistic imagery (Carreiras 2006, 42) and a 'masculine character' (Woodward and Winter 2007, 15) that endures, underpinned by the unshakeable historical connection between men and war, women and peace (Goldstein 2001). As women veterans, we reveal how we could not see that some of our gendered experiences of military service were 'deeply odd' when we were serving but having the time and space, the distance, to critically reflect, subsequently in an academically challenging environment, has enabled these personal revelations. More importantly, we ask how we were blinded to what was going on around us when serving and how it is that we can see it now? We attach real methodological significance to the conversations we have had which unlocked the 'deeply odd' as a critical tool and use this insight to ask what the particular insider-outsider perspective of the woman veteran brings to critical feminist scholarship.

The term 'veteran', to a British audience, conjures up the image of an elderly white man – a veteran of the First or Second World Wars or a more contemporary image of an injured serviceman from Iraq or Afghanistan, perhaps an Invictus Games competitor. And women as veterans, like women as soldiers, remain problematic and seemingly marginalized from mainstream literature whether from the historical record or social science literature. And yet, women's voices can be found in critical feminist scholarship.

Critical Military Studies is well populated with female scholars who have countered this ambivalence to include a female voice in military history and international relations by examining the politics of gender in the British Army and exploring contemporary debates centred on women's participation in Western militaries (Carreiras 2006; Woodward and Winter 2007; Duncanson and Woodward 2016). Feminist critical military scholarship has challenged masculinized military power and the 'militarization of women's lives' (Enloe 1983) underpinned by 'militarized femininity' (Enloe 1993, 174), or 'militarism that relies on the control of femininity' (Sjoberg 2007, 84). Bulmer and Eichler employ these ideas in their exploration of the veteran experience of transition to civilian life through the idea of 'unmaking militarized masculinity' (Bulmer and Eichler 2017, 161), reinforcing that it is rare for women to be recognized as a distinct group with 'gender-specific challenges' (Bulmer and Eichler 2017, 169).

Where we differ from the cohort of feminist CMS scholars, who outlined what 'being critical' meant in this new field, is that we have served. To us being critical about the military and our service takes on new meaning as ex-military women. The community of CMS scholar talk of being 'haunted' by an 'assumption that feminism and being in close proximity to military personnel are somehow incompatible' (Basham and Bulmer 2017, 65). We are not just negotiating close proximity to the military through interviews, archives, and locations: we have been part of it, it will always be part of us. We recognize that there is a wider debate about the nature of military critique and how this intersects with the anti-militarist sentiment (Williams et al. 2016; Rossdale 2019; Schrader 2019 and Gonzalez, 2016). Duncanson explains how anti-militarist feminism is underpinned by the argument that the 'gendered destructiveness of militarism and war and the misogynist culture of militaries generate a feminist analysis of militarism and war as a system, a fundamentally anti-feminist system' (Duncanson 2017, 47) and consequently how they 'tend to rule out the possibility that women's military participation can result in anything other than co-option' (Duncanson 2017, 50).

Women veterans as critical researchers embody a unique positionality or 'perspective, orientation and situatedness of the researcher vis-a-vis the researchees' (Henry, Higate, and Sanghera 2009, 468). We have had to embrace what Greenwood, as an anthropologist and Royal Navy reservist, describes as 'learn[ing] to oscillate' between being an insider veteran and outsider researcher (Greenwood 2016, 86). This unique positionality underpins our sense that there were things we could not see as serving insiders and could only see when we became outsiders to our service (Merton 1972). Despite some influential autoethnographies from military personnel 'throw[ing] light onto the dark recesses of the military interior' (Ware 2016, 240; Hockey 2016; Walker 2016; Jaffe 1988, 2008; Macleish 2013), reflexivity or taking 'account of the self in relation to other subjects and objects' (Eagleton-Pierce 2011, 1) has remained 'largely peripheral' to the interdisciplinary field of military studies (Higate and Cameron 2006, 219). We are embracing being problematic women veterans by positioning ourselves, as women, as 'subject rather than object of enquiry' (Hemmings 2012, 151) empowering the research to become a political feminist intervention (Henry, Higate, and Sanghera 2009, 469; Baker et al. 2016). Problematic both as insider and outsider; our identity a challenge in the military and now as feminist scholars navigating anti-militarist feminism. Whilst we are emphasizing our minority voice as women veterans, we acknowledge that our privilege as straight, white, middle-class women – only one step out of uniform from Khalili's 'white, literate,

articulate and doctorate festooned’ ‘soldier-scholars’ (2011, 5) – does not permit us to speak on behalf of all women veterans where transient ‘multiplex identities’ including race, ethnicity, sexuality and class remain uncaptured by our personal narrative (Narayan 1993; Gray 2016; England 1994; Henry, Higate, and Sanghera 2009). But embracing the reflective turn to destabilize epistemologies (Ackerly and True 2008) can help others to challenge ‘the grand narratives of International Relations’ (Brigg and Bleiker 2010, 779, 787; Eagleton-Pierce 2011) and broaden its appeal (Higate and Cameron 2006).

We have been frustrated by our sense that the military and mainstream military studies are looking for a certain type of critical, one which ‘instrumentalises critique as a means through which to generate recommendations for the improvement of military policy’ (Basham and Bulmer 2017, 59) or what the military calls ‘lessons learnt’, rather than the CMS definition of

[being] “sceptically curious” about its character, representation, application, and effects. In approaching military power as a question, rather than taking it for granted, critical military studies more readily engages in a sceptical curiosity about how it works – often through a variety of social and domestic political agendas that may bear no relation to the role of protecting the nation from foreign threats. (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 1)

This paper employs our status as problematic women veterans to challenge with a critical voice from a uniquely positioned insider-outsider. We draw on the concept of ‘critical friendship’ – reflecting our researching a community we have been part of – ‘navigat[ing] the political and ethical tensions [of] relations of proximity’ (Holvikivi 2019, 132) and remaining ‘open to the possibility of dialogue even in the midst of critique’ (Woodward et al. 2020, 3). We suggest that using the concept of the ‘deeply odd’ as a critical tool allows us to analyse and deconstruct this insider-outsider status. As a historian and social scientist, we acknowledge the interdisciplinary nuance underpinning this methodological tool which draws on feminist politics of identity and consciousness-raising (Bartky 1975); the anthropological dynamic between the Self and the Other (Narayan 1993) and sociological reflexivity (Callero 2003). As insiders and simultaneously outsiders in the military, our desire and need to conform in order to fit into an environment of militarized masculinity prevented us from seeing the ‘deeply odd’ nature of our interactions and, indeed, our very existence in that context. Now, in the academic environment, we see our positioning as problematic, ‘deeply odd’ within the feminist CMS community, ‘deeply odd’ as women veterans amongst the male-dominated field of veterans researching defence and the military. We are insider-outsiders once again. Perhaps all these communities are ‘deeply odd’ in their different ways, and our journey to an intersection of these fields, and the conversations that we have had on the way, was necessary to uncover this uncomfortable reality.

## The ‘deeply odd’

Through our enlightening and revealing conversations, we have been shocked to recall some of the unsettling experiences or what we have come to call ‘the deeply odd’, which took place during our service and which we had normalized at the time. Let us be clear that in using this term, what we imply is ‘deeply concerningly odd’ rather than ‘somewhat curious’ since we have used it, in some instances, in relation to testimonies of

discrimination and harassment. We both agreed that ‘Deeply Odd’ represented, to us, the exploratory and revelatory nature of our conversations. Our militarization process took place a decade apart, but this critical tool has not only been effective for each of us personally, but it has also been effective in helping us to identify points of difference and similarity across these time periods. We both feel that the context of the 1990s, with one of us joining at the beginning and one at the end of that decade, was significant to our journey. This was the era of ‘girl power’ which involved the frequent and prominent dismissal of feminism as either no longer relevant or niche. Whether in schools or crewrooms, we could not avoid the popular narrative in Britain of women ‘having it all’, entitled to drink and party ‘like men’. In a culture that celebrated magazines like *FHM* and programmes, such as *Top Gear*, feminism struggled to stay mainstream. At the same time, female junior officers in the armed forces were extremely far removed from academic feminist discourse. Despite both experiencing incidents of sexual harassment when serving, albeit on different scales (probably attributed to the time during which we served), nonetheless, during most of our careers, we would always have said that sexual harassment and sexism were not something we experienced, these were just one off occurrences we had buried in our memory. But our military lives day to day involved the types of experiences we opened this paper with. These were not behaviours with which we were uncomfortable: we just unquestioningly accepted them as part of military culture. We feel that we had become desensitized to this behaviour, to ‘a whole culture of oddness’ which accords with General Sir Nick Carter’s assessment that the Army has ‘an overly sexualised culture in which inappropriate behaviour is deemed acceptable’ (Sanghani 2015, n.p.) and reflects the US situation captured by the idea of US women soldiers having to fight a war on two fronts, against the enemy and misogyny (Benedict 2009).

And just as the context is important in discussing our journeys to militarization at that time or our experiences when serving, so it is in this new remembering. It is perhaps more than happenstance that our journeys as academic researchers and reflexive female veterans have coincided with the rise of the #MeToo campaign. They have occurred at a time of increased discussion of discrimination and sexual harassment within strongly hierarchical institutions and/or distinctly delineated disparities in power between members depending on rank, age, gender, etc. There is a ‘resonance’ effect in listening to other’s memories. In the same way that this critical tool has enabled us to talk across the potential barriers of different services and periods of service, we believe it could similarly be effective in unlocking the hidden pasts of other institutions from politics to sport. We acknowledge, of course, that women working in many other male-dominated fields in the 1990s and 2000s were similarly distant from academic feminist discourse and may well, as they reflect on their pasts, recoil at their memories of similar behaviours. In our cases, the experience was almost certainly intensified by the fact that as young women in our twenties we lived alongside the men we worked with (whether in a Wardroom – at sea or ashore – or in an Officer’s Mess). And we were serving in institutions that still barred women from certain roles within their communities (working in submarines or the RAF Regiment, for example). However, the parallels with other fields offer opportunities for new remembering for those women too.

What, then, makes this a methodologically significant critical tool? In considering our position now as critical veteran researchers, we recognize that our conversations have run in parallel to a process of deconstructing our military identities, demilitarizing, whilst being trained to question and analyse. We believe we would not have recognized or been able to articulate our changed relationship with our memories of armed service and specifically, our treatment as women was it not for these reflective conversations. In revisiting our pasts and teasing out different ways of looking at the past, we have had to experiment with talking about shocking things we had otherwise buried, an experience deeply reliant on mutual trust, as well as the instinctive understanding of shared experiences between fellow veterans. Memory, for us, has not been a straightforward or linear journey of rewinding and replaying but a multi-dimensional sensation of circling around, behind and in front, of the memory to analyse it fully. We recognize that memory, particularly with this distance from the experiences recalled, is a construct, as Synne Dyvik discusses in relation to military memoirs, created in the 'very recollection of personal experience' (Dyvik 2016, 136). In uncovering the 'deeply odd' aspects of our past, we realized that this characterization served as a critical device in explaining the sensation we have experienced in revisiting our experiences of memory.

### **The veteran turned researcher**

Our experiences have shown that women serving in the military are predisposed to overlook, 'unsee' or 'not see' acts of discrimination, aligning with anti-militarist feminist predictions of 'co-option' (Duncanson 2017, 50). This leads to a bigger question about the ability of military personnel to think critically and to engage with 'sceptical curiosity' (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 1). Does the construction and negotiation of identity that is part of militarization mean that serving military 'thinkers' can't see (or remember) certain issues? This has broader implications for policy- and decision-making, and about the relevance of strategic culture in reinforcing attitudes and behaviours (Griffin 2017, 202). How does this affect the military's ability to change the culture to address inappropriate behaviours as recommended by the Wigston report (Wigston 2019)? It also raises questions about the way that militaries handle disruptive behaviours or creative thinking, since both challenge institutional norms but are potential sources of innovation and improvement. It may be that people with those characteristics are in turn more likely to reject ongoing membership of the military to find spaces in which to exist that allow their development. Could this be the case with the veteran turned academic researcher?

Additionally, we have come to feel that being female veterans has given us a different experience of transition: unlike male veterans, we have had to recover a female identity as well as a civilian identity. They need only recover a civilian identity (and arguably in many of the typical employment sectors for veterans, such as the defence and finance industries, and in skilled trades or working as process, plant and machine operatives, their serving male warrior identity faces little challenge), although we imagine a similar experience for male veterans entering the anti-war space.<sup>2</sup> And, we have to make more of a conscious effort to engage with women, from the school playground to the boardroom, where we sometimes gravitate to male company, still feeling we appear outsiders to women who judge us as having abandoned or escaped our female identity by having chosen to do 'manly things' surrounded by men and away for long periods of time. We

have seemingly given ourselves up to militarization and perhaps eschewed what might be seen as incompatible feminine roles as wives and mothers, as nurturers. We have gone from being an ‘other’ as a servicewoman in a military institution culturally resistant to women’s integration (Carreiras 2006; Woodward and Winter 2007; Goldstein 2018) to an ‘other’ as a female veteran trying to regain a civilian and feminine identity. Our experience has been that we neither ‘fit’ in the veteran community nor with the military wives and that we often fall between the gaps of the research on each community (Enloe 1983, 109; Cree 2020; Hyde 2015). In fact, the relationship between servicewomen and military wives is a good example of the nuanced dynamics at play (Lightfoot n.d.; Hunter and Germano 2017). Whilst male colleagues often treat servicewomen as ‘one of the boys’ giving us an insight into their behaviour and thinking that most women would not see, particularly when deployed, this only goes so far. And at the same time, their wives treat us with slight mistrust that we will be amongst the women they see every day while they are away from their wives and families. For all the attempts to recover a feminine identity on the outside, this honorary male status can re-emerge on occasions, such as Remembrance where wearing our own medals marks us out as different by emphasizing that we, too, served.

As we started to remember differently, concurrent with developing analytical and critical skills as academic researchers, both of us felt increasingly empowered to reclaim and review these memories. Inevitably, given our more confident voices as individuals with identities no longer subsumed within a military culture, we began to ask questions of ourselves and others. Over time, an obvious divergence emerged between us as ex-military researchers and former colleagues who remained serving. In conversations in public and in private with them, their denial of any difference in treatment in the military between women and men became increasingly dissonant with our uncovering of the ‘deeply odd’. Some responses, as has been the case in #MeToo cases, implied that stronger women were able to rise above such behaviour: the implication being that any form of sexual discrimination or harassment experienced was a sign of weakness. There were echoes in their views of comments made by former MP, Edwina Currie, who said that if there was a harassment culture when she was an MP ‘I wasn’t aware of it [...] maybe I wasn’t aware because I grew up in Liverpool and I am not some kind of Victorian fainting woman’ and ‘if anybody had tried anything on with me that I didn’t welcome I would’ve said “oh get lost buster”’ (talkRadio interview, 30 October 2017). The comments from former military colleagues dismissing the issue of discrimination exposed the tension between the association of soldiering with ‘warriors’, strength and masculinity and any potential admission of vulnerability which manifested itself in this conversational exchange.

Whilst we have made clear that as women we were not typical service personnel and that this has carried forward into our veteran identity, it is not as simple to say that we have found an easy home on the outside in academia. We certainly do not excuse or avoid acknowledgement that the academy is hardly a blameless bastion of purity in matters of discrimination and harassment (Vettese 2019). But we also recognize that the military and academic environments differ in many ways, in terms of culture, values and politics, as well as in their inherently different relationship with dissent and discourse, which may be what drew us towards academia. But in our engagement with the critical feminist academic community, there is no avoiding that being a female veteran is a challenge to



some scholars given the strongly interwoven history of feminism and anti-militarist sentiment (Duncanson 2017; Goldstein 2001). Anti-war feminism is only one subset of feminism but it has a strong voice and we seem ‘deeply odd’ in having chosen to be a part of the military, an agent of potentially lethal force, and identifying as feminists. We experience a sense of a scepticism that we could have left our military pasts behind us and the truth is we haven’t but that is why we bring something different to critical military scholarship. Neither of us identifies as anti-militarist, but we are critical feminists and we are open to hearing these anti-militarist arguments, in fact, we seek them out. Whilst we would identify as believing in the utility of military power, even if we are sceptical about the bureaucracy and culture that surrounds it and the soundness of its application, we are aware that we are on a trajectory with our veteran-academic identities and exploring the spectrum of critical voices right through to the pacifist is really helpful. We recognize the tension between our pride in aspects of our military service and our shock at our inevitable complicity in a flawed military culture but we see this as a creative tension. It is not paralysing or destructive, but empowering and drives us to explore this dynamic further. The value of our critical methodological tool has been in helping us to openly explore the plethora of critical perspectives which might otherwise have been too ‘extreme’ to even engage with, given our military pasts. So, not only have we experienced the ‘deeply odd’ as insiders, we have become ‘deeply odd’ as outsiders.

### **Insider identity**

*Sophy* Even before I started school (in the mid 1970s) I wanted to be a pilot. In the mid 1980s I was told by my secondary school’s career teacher that I was not allowed, because I was a woman, to fly either military or large commercial aircraft. I joined the RAF as a pilot when the rules changed and I was one of the first to make it to Fast Jet Flying Training although I failed in the final stages of the year-long course. At RAF Valley, flying the Hawk, I had asked to be protected from the media attention swirling around women trainee aircrew at the time. My Chief Flying Instructor responded to this request by pretending to invite me for a debrief on aircraft gunnery and then revealing a Sunday Express journalist when I arrived in his office for the meeting, forcing me to take part in an interview and photo shoot. I did as I was told and barely reflected on the experience until much later.

*Hannah* In basic training I remember making a concerted effort with a female friend to meet the male standard in passing the 2.5 km run in under 11 m 15s which we managed once before leaving. Six years later as the Air Engineer Officer for a squadron of 3 helicopters, I found myself managing a department of over 40 (predominantly male and older) engineers, but I always felt respected, accepted, treated on merit. I can see now that there was a part of me that joined up to prove to myself that I could hold my own physically and intellectually in this male domain, and still take pride in my professional achievements. But, I had buried the memories of former bosses acting inappropriately towards a young officer, the golf social it was assumed I wouldn’t want to take part, and the constant sexualized ‘banter’ about wives, girlfriends and celebrities. The inside for me meant that having your bra straps pinged undone from outside your shirt when working at a desk as a joke or hearing your male colleagues chatting away in the shared bathrooms at sea with only a thin curtain

between your showers. Surely, these weren't my story of a fulfilling engineering career that took me all over the world, a career I have promoted to young girls at STEM talks.

There is an old adage that basic military training is about breaking you down and building you back together again as a soldier, sailor or airman. But what does it mean to be a servicewoman when 'the image of women is seen as a fundamental element in the definition of a soldier's identity, functioning as a referential 'other'? Women embody 'all the values and qualities that are not male, and thus not desirable for a soldier'. Women are required to be a 'sexual object', a 'hunting trophy', a 'protected being' (Carreiras 2006, 43–44). The war system might be dependent on feminine roles but as 'mothers, wives and sweethearts' (Goldstein 2001, 5), 'nurses, prostitutes and social workers' (Enloe 1983), but not as soldiers. Having made the decision to join up, this is not something either of us thought about. We wanted to fit in and get on with our training. We did not think about how the ideal we were being asked to become was characterized or saw ourselves as being an 'other' to our male colleagues. We were just another naval and air force officer cadet at the time – our reflections came later. We did feel like military insiders then, one of the teams.

We did not forget we were women though. As we navigated our way through training and our careers we had to find ways of negotiating our gendered military identity whether 'masculinising'; 'accommodating femininity'; or 'degendering or assuming a neutral persona' (Barrett, 2002, cited by Woodward and Winter 2007, 75; Sjöberg 2013). This was just how we were behaving to fit in. We now look back and feel that this rosy picture, of acceptance and fitting in, was in many ways a falsehood. This relates to our reticence to stand out any more than we already did, as a minority of women in a male-dominated organization, and to campaign for 'women's rights' in an institution whose hierarchical structure and traditional character did not encourage politics. So, we got on with it. Of course, we had agency but we chose to subvert ourselves to the structure we had joined, rather than challenging it. That said, since we could not appreciate the strange nature of the institution we were trying to fit into – we could not see it for what it was – perhaps that also made it hard to resist. But going further we suggest that we started to believe our own rhetoric and stopped questioning inappropriate behaviours and potentially discriminatory practices to keep our heads down and make career progression. As a result, we could not see the 'deeply odd'. In the arc of our military careers, though, we can see that our initial complicity hid an inner resistance that has only fully emerged now that we have reached a critical distance from our former lives. This distance is not just intellectual, but physical, emotional and temporal. Physically we are not just living civilian lives away from the all-consuming military environment but we are not part of those spaces (nor can we access them freely even if we wanted to) or surrounded by the lifestyle. Emotionally we are distanced in a way that allows us to recall our experiences with some dispassion and a new-found honesty. Temporally the distance of years has allowed us time to grow away from the military institutional environment and our immersion in the academic environment has escalated that process.

## Outsider identity

*Sophy* The journey from veteran to researcher for me has been circular: from veteran to non-veteran to veteran again, but now as a subordinate but accepted element of my identity. I entered the academy keen to lose the 'label' of veteran. For me, being ex-RAF

had become a definition of what I wasn't (anymore) rather than what I was. I subsequently found that I could engage again with contemporary military questions, but on different terms. When I was asked to write a *Guardian* opinion piece on a report into harassment and bullying in the military in the summer of 2019, I realized that if my veteran self had still been dominant, I would have rejected the opportunity as critical of 'colleagues' even though in this context the criticism was deserved. While my subordinate veteran self was important to my ability to critique and understand the subject, my dominant reflexive researcher self was the self with the necessary confidence, motivation and distance to write a critical piece that did not shy away from the reality of the problem within the services.

*Hannah* Being 'face to face' with the military again to present my research, I knew I needed to sound 'credible' to be heard. I had the advantage of being assumed to be one of them – I speak the same language of military jargon, I can introduce myself with familiar ranks, with experience of familiar operations: 'A former Navy Lieutenant Commander who deployed on Herrick 10'. I want them to listen, I want them to hear what I have to say. And I feel a certain sense of being comfortable, I know what their expectations of me are, I even maybe feel a sense of loyalty to an organization that was so formative to my development as a person. But I have a critical feminist perspective to convey. Standing up and saying I am going to be critical does not concern my audience: they are conversant with the use of 'lessons learnt' to inform policy. But when I start to ask questions about the nature of combat and soldiering and what it means for the gendered military institution it is a different kind of critical.

*Hannah* Getting back together with serving and sometimes former military friends can feel uncomfortable too when I get into describing my critical research. I feel that they will see me as disloyal to what we think of as our shared experiences and even disapproving of their ongoing service. It can be hard to describe the transition from the military to academy without sounding as though you think you know better, you have new insights you couldn't see when serving so neither will they. And this sense of loyalty to the military can be testing. I grew up in the military, it shaped who I am and I struggle not to find myself talking about 'we' when talking about the Armed Forces. And yet these revelations about the gendered realities of service, test how I negotiate memories of military service. I find myself struggling to reconcile the fulfilling and exciting formative experiences and amazing people with the uncomfortable reflections on the gendered institution.

*Sophy* Thinking about my behaviours and those of my peers, friends, subordinates and commanders is complicated because I can see that I was complicit in the institution which sanctioned, or ignored, them. The line between what I always saw as unacceptable behaviour (assault, groping, discrimination in career progression) and what I only later came to see as unacceptable ('banter', patronizing attitudes to gender equality and towards women) is hazy when I try and articulate it. In reviewing my military experience critically, I am self-conscious both of the potential for condescension in my attitude and for the accusation of hypocrisy. Stepping away from the institutionalized mindset of the military and into a role as a critical researcher has been liberating but also awkward. I'm definitely an outsider from the military complex, but my ex-military status can distance

me from the CMS community. I'm developing a different way of thinking and behaving but perhaps I'm still an outsider here?

And then, on leaving we become this problematic being, the female veteran. We start to deconstruct our military identity to become 'civilian' again, outsiders to the institution. But there is an added dimension to this deconstruction for women veterans, because, however, we chose to negotiate our gendered military identity there is a readjustment to make on returning to civilian life. One's day to day interactions are no longer predominantly with men, the sense of needing to hold one's own in a male domain diminishes and you have to find a new way to be, which for us, as researchers, included coming to terms with the self that we were. So on becoming outsiders in one sense, we begin to see that as women we were always outsiders in the military, as well as insiders, but we needed distance, these conversations and a confidence to critique our past to reach that realization. Becoming feminist researchers has given us the space to step back, to explore this deconstruction of identity and what it means for our politics – we recognize this might not have been afforded to us as female veterans outside of the research arena. And we have come to realize that there are multiple dimensions to this tension between insider and outsider.

We still both have friends who are serving, we both engage with the military in different ways and we are torn between a sense of loyalty to former colleagues and a sense of frustration about the institution. We were on the inside and we believed in the institution; at times our lives depended on our faith in it. To an extent, there is a resonance with Goffman's notion of the 'mortification of the self' as applied to individuals subsumed within a total institution whose individual identity is removed (Goffman 1961). Perhaps our journey away from the military has allowed us to feel both 'mortified' by some of our experiences, and by the denial of these types of experiences by other women, while also understanding how institutionalization is inevitable in a military organization. 'Mortification of the self' happens perhaps in both directions, first in being institutionalized and then later, after leaving the service, having to confront one's own actions (perhaps passivity or denial) and those of one's own colleagues, some of them friends and some fine leaders, despite, at the very least, their failure to meet some fairly basic standards of behaviour.

During our military service we became a part of the team to the detriment of our individual identities and only on reclaiming these identities can we see things differently. But we also do not think we could see the 'deeply odd' as we do now, and we certainly could not share these personal experiences in the way we have together if one or other of us had been independent researchers without military experience. It is our military service that has given us the insider knowledge to understand and interpret the experiences we look back on, but we needed to become outsiders to feel the mortification that prompted our joint explorations in the research for this paper. Yet as members of a new institution, the academy, the insider-outsider juxtaposition rears its head once more. Are we truly insiders in the CMS community, for example, with our military backgrounds and experiences? And when we re-engage with the military community are we met with the hand of critical friendship or a newfound wariness? Perhaps what makes us different is that through our exploration of the 'deeply odd' we are able to interrogate our current

identities and embrace the insider-outsider status that, as female veteran researchers, we embody.

## The challenge

In identifying the concept of ‘deeply odd’ as a tool for exploring the position of the insider-outsider, we look to challenge both the conventional military community and the CMS community. How can either embrace our particular status and refashioned identities? Can we, as academic researchers, credibly cooperate and engage with both environments or must we choose? Can a critical friendship blossom or will our voices be dismissed? Can we be critical military scholars while retaining a complex insider-outsider status? If the view of others is that we cannot, then where do we belong? The merits of veteran researchers, with their insider knowledge but perhaps an insider bias, might be better defined in terms of their engagement with their ‘deeply odd’ status. Although we have explored this conundrum in the context of our gender, we propose that evaluating one’s experience, academic stance, or even one’s political stance as veteran researchers, using the concept of the ‘deeply odd’, could help veteran researchers with other experiences to explore their backgrounds and insider-outsider status. The CMS community might also use the tool to analyse and critique veteran researchers to establish how much these veterans have embraced the search for, and acknowledgement of, the ‘deeply odd’. Furthermore, the military is a particularly stark example of an institution which consciously moulds the identities of its members, but to some degree all institutions do this and they, too, could be approached by researchers in the same way.

The CMS community have expressed a desire to resist and affect change through increasing their proximity to the military institution, asking the question ‘What remains hidden if we fail to get closer to that which we critique?’ (Basham and Bulmer 2017, 68). Veteran scholars are uniquely placed to bridge this gap, but whilst we are aware of a number of male veteran scholars within the CMS community, to date we have not met any women veteran researchers in this field, with the exception of those serving in conscripted militaries. We argue that the voices of women veterans are missing and can bring something different to this conversation: their particular insider-outsider status challenges preconceptions about how the masculine culture of the military is manifested, embedded and sustained and its consequent reproduction of gendered hierarchies of power (Millar and Tidy 2017). Recent years have seen a concerted effort by critical feminist scholars to challenge ideas like militarized masculinity as overly simplistic (Millar and Tidy 2017). Women veteran researchers should be an ally in identifying and exploring ‘blind spots in feminist knowledge about the military’ (Basham and Bulmer 2017, 60–61). But this requires the CMS community to engage with veterans that do not fit certain easy stereotypes, veterans whose existence is a challenge to deeply embedded feminist links with anti-militarism (Duncanson 2017). We want to be recognized as critical researchers *for* our military experience, not in spite of it. And we recognize that some of this needs to come from us too. So conscious are we of our military past that we presuppose it will draw an intake of breath from many feminist scholars, that we need to take care to share what women veterans can bring to the CMS community.

## Conclusion

Women veterans are problematic. We are problematic both as military insiders and as academic outsiders. As military women, we were in a minority and had to find ways to fit in, ways that did not challenge the male warrior stereotype. And only now can we see that we never achieved the acceptance we thought we had at the time. But our identity is not just a challenge to the military: society is not sure what to make of us, these women who have seemingly left their families to live and work in this male environment, the goal of which is life-taking when women are supposed to give life. And then as women veterans, as we reclaim our civilian female identity we are largely invisible both to the military which surrounds itself with and sees one type of conventional veteran, and in scholarship where women veterans voices are rare. Yet as feminist scholars we are also problematic because our military past sets out a challenge to anti-militarist feminism. Language is important to our argument – we do not identify as veterans because we feel alienated from the veteran community, we do not fit the stereotype and our critical work seems somehow disloyal. We argue that the veteran voice needs to be redefined and recognized as something more nuanced than the male former senior officer's club.

We have at times been shocked as we have relived and recounted our memories of the experiences of being women in the military, buried memories which have resurfaced and helped us to question our former lives. But what has been even more fascinating to us, has not been the memories themselves, however shocking, upsetting or amusing, but that we see them so differently now than when we were serving. We want to make clear that we are not just sharing some experiences from our past, experiences embedded in the prevailing culture of the 1990s and 2000s. We are not saying there has not been a change, both societally and in the military since then. However, this is not a function of a particular era but of an institution whose strategic culture is sexist but is also unable to see this. Whilst this has important implications for interpreting the recommendations of the Wigston report, for example, it also makes us question what else the military cannot see from the inside and how it can engage with critical voices, indeed develop critical friendships, to shine a light on these blindspots (Wigston 2019). We see our critical distance – intellectual, physical, emotional and temporal – as shedding important light on how we reached the conclusions we have. And we believe that we have something to offer a military institution willing to engage with critical veteran voices like ours at a sufficient critical distance to offer different perspectives.

Methodologically, we cannot stress enough how important it is for veterans to have these conversations, to unpick our pasts, to explore our service and remember these forgotten experiences. We are certain that we would not have reached these conclusions without our conversations giving us the confidence to share these experiences, draw parallels and question each other and ourselves. Only such reflexive practice can unlock buried memories and see behind the stage set of the military to recognize behaviours and an institutional culture which we had normalized. We would encourage more female veterans to consider pursuing academic careers and for researchers to do more to ensure women veteran's voices are included in their studies of veterans. We would advocate follow-on research to explore the idea of the woman veteran as problematic both as insider and outsider and how their critical insights might differ from male colleagues when serving and beyond. We would suggest that listening to the voices of female veterans

could help to unlock this by sharing our more detached reflections. This, of course, could extend to other minority outsider groups and support research exploring diversity in the military. Whilst there is rightly increasing research into transition to civilian life in terms of veteran's mental health, we advocate for more research into the way in which veterans differently reflect on their service and how they come to think about the military institution and its operations. This can only be achieved by greater engagement with the full diversity of the veteran community in research both as participants and scholars.

## Notes

1. Sophy joined the RAF in 1991, on graduation from university, aged 21 and left in 2011. Hannah joined the Royal Navy in 2000 as a University Cadet Entrant aged 18, completing her undergraduate degree whilst serving, and left in 2015.
2. Career Transition Partnership Annual report 'notable differences' between male and females service leavers. For example, males were more likely to be employed in Skilled Trade occupations (22% vs 5%) and as Process, Plant and Machinery Operatives (13% vs 2%) while females were more likely to be employed in Caring, Leisure and other Service occupations (14% vs 2%) and Administrative and Secretarial occupations (11% vs 4%). *Career Transition Partnership Annual Statistics: UK Regular Service Personnel Employment* published 27 February 2020, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/868768/20200226\\_-\\_Statistical\\_Bulletin\\_v3\\_-\\_O.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/868768/20200226_-_Statistical_Bulletin_v3_-_O.pdf) (accessed 12 January 2021).

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