

# **Repurposing Liverpool’s Waterfront as a Liminal ‘Military Landscape’: a Photographic Essay**

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## **Abstract**

This photo essay documents via analytic autoethnographic observations the experience of being a ‘show-goer’ at a public civil-military event in the UK. Hosted by the city of Liverpool during 2017, Armed Forces Day witnessed transient civic-spaces across the city’s waterfront be transformed into what is defined here as a ‘liminal military landscape’. Following established research within human geography studying British military airshows, this photo essay makes use of visual methods and fieldnotes as forms of data collection and analysis. Used in concert to provide analytic autoethnographic observations, these methods help articulate Armed Forces Day as a nuanced experience that served more purposes than generating military recruitment. Instead, it is suggested that this civil-military event repurposed the civic space of Liverpool’s waterfront to promote ‘liberal militarism’ as a cultural product, through which the military promoted its own imagined heteronormative institutional identity to the public via various recruitment activities, objects and props.

## **Keywords**

Critical military studies, analytic autoethnography, military landscapes, Armed Forces Day

## **Armed Forces Day 2017: “No politics needed”?**

Armed Forces Day is a national public event in the United Kingdom. Formerly established as Veterans’ Day during 2006, Armed Forces Day has taken place annually since June 2009 within various locations across the country with the stated purpose of being “the lead action-oriented day to honour and celebrate the work of the Armed Forces” (Armed Forces Day, 2016: 5). During 2017, the flagship event for Armed Forces Day was hosted by the city of Liverpool (Culture Liverpool, 2017) with the intention to “take over the city centre and waterfront, and be a huge celebration of the work of the Armed Forces and their families” (Armed Forces Day, 2017, online). The specified ‘take over’ of such locations is indicated by the map in Fig. 1.1 using hand-drawn shading to demarcate civic spaces repurposed as

‘securitised’ (blue), ‘militarised’ (green) and ‘prohibited’ (black). As the main concerns of this essay, the mass presence of former and current military personnel - plus their accoutrement, equipment and vehicles - within the two latter of these spaces temporarily transformed the civic identity of select localities across Liverpool’s waterfront (and city centre) during the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> June 2017.

On the first day of this event (24<sup>th</sup> June 2017) Liverpool Mayor Joe Anderson (2017) proclaimed on social media that there were “No Politics needed on this important day.” This statement received mixed rebuttals from the public ranging from ardent support for British ‘troops’ to a misunderstanding of the ‘celebratory’ intentions of the event with those practiced annually in the UK as ‘remembrance’ to commemorate the Armistice. Much political protest was also directed at the presence of a Conservative British Prime Minister (Teresa May) attending Armed Forces Day in a city well known for its opposition to the Tory Party and its politics. However, what was foregrounded during Armed Forces Day 2017 yet evaded such levels of public scrutiny were the perpetuation of “liberal beliefs in freedom, and in certain modes of political economy that are assumed to deliver it, [that] have normalized the maintenance of military power and its expansionist, interventionist uses” (Basham, 2018: 33, my insert). Understood in these terms, on a day where the ‘political’ was proclaimed unnecessary the (geo)politics of ‘liberal militarism’ were set to be perpetuated, performed and consumed as cultural products during Armed Forces Day 2017 within the civic spaces across Liverpool’s waterfront.

## Liverpool's waterfront: a liminal 'military landscape'



Fig. 1.1 Artefact/keepsake/'sinew': photocopied and annotated map illustration of Armed Forces Day 2017 detailing Liverpool's waterfront.

Guided by the hand annotated map illustration of Liverpool's waterfront in Fig. 1.1, this photographic essay documents my experience to "emulate the show-goer" (Rech and Williams, 2016: 279) at this one-off public event by visualising the transformation of Liverpool's waterfront as a liminal, rather than permanent or lasting, 'military landscape' (qua Woodward, 2000). This is evidenced in the photographs I present by many objects, props and activities which temporarily fixed and situated the British military's imagined identity of itself (qua Basham, 2013) within a popular civic space and tourist hotspot in Liverpool. My focus in this photographic essay is not on the activities and events of the day specifically, but instead the 'transient elements' (Heng, forthcoming) along Liverpool's waterfront, occupied by three branches of the British Armed Forces (Army, Navy and Royal Air Force) to communicate and reproduce military economies, identities and materialities with and to different

publics. Taking the view of Basham (2018: 33), as we will come to learn through a reading of the perceptual fields captured within these photographs, “[t]he facilitation of liberal militarism – that is, the commitment by liberal democratic states and societies to maintain and use military force – is therefore necessarily diffuse”.

### **Making analytic autoethnographic observations of securitised and (de)militarised spaces**

The photographs presented here were gathered via ‘analytic autoethnographic’ observations (Anderson, 2006) undertaken one day prior to Armed Forces Day 2017, and during the subsequent two days of its main events and activities. These observations were comprised of and informed by my own ‘opportunistic’ biography (Anderson, 2006) as a former member of the British military, now sociologist and resident of Liverpool. Used in concert with fieldnotes (presented throughout as photographic captions), the collection of this visual data observed IVSA ethical principles whereby “confidentiality is not required with respect to observations in public places, activities conducted in public, or other settings where no rules of privacy are provided by law or custom” (Papademas and IVSA, 2009: 254).

Whilst walking the parade route partially seen in Fig. 1.1 (depicted by a dotted line running from James Street to Princes Dock), I became “explicitly visible” (Atkinson, 2015: 162) within the fieldwork. Taken the day prior to Armed Forces Day, within Fig. 1.2 I observe a personal (de)militarised space which dually articulates the disembodiment of my previous military identity, and serves as recognition of my ‘analytic autoethnographic’ positionality within the fieldwork that followed (including the photographs taken and fieldnotes produced).



Fig. 1.2 Derby Square, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2017

“I notice that in the building opposite the monument is where I had initially signed up to join the military in 1999. This is no longer an AFCO (Armed Forces Careers Office) ... [t]he AFCO is no longer there, and so it is that a military identity is no longer with me” (Fieldnotes, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2017).

Stood nearby Derby Square during the following day, the presence of the ‘military veterans’ visible in Fig. 1.3, and other current and ex-military personnel ‘on parade’ during Armed Forces Day’s opening sequence of events, served to establish and perform the military’s imagination of its own hegemonic masculine identity (qua Basham 2013) across Liverpool’s waterfront. Surrounded by those with whom I shared a common experience of military institutionalisation I became aware of my own “stake in the beliefs, values, and actions of other setting members” (Anderson, 2006: 383) who were in attendance. None of the (liberal) militarised identities, rituals, symbolism, accoutrement or activities being presented, engaged in, and performed within Fig. 1.3 and throughout the subsequent days’ events held any personal resonance.



Fig. 1.3 Castle Street, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2017

“... a tall, well-built man bumped into me without noticing. He was wearing black civilian clothing ... As he made contact with me, the feeling was familiar, ‘that’s a pistol’ I thought to myself ... [t]his man appeared to be a plain clothes officer of some description, indicating to me that – coupled with the visible police presence here – there are layers of security at work to which the public are completely unaware of” (Fieldnotes, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

Seeing these transient civic spaces in this way framed my analytic positioning during the events that followed. They also help orientate the geography of where Armed Forces Day 2017 primarily took place (Fig. 1.1) and through which the following photographs can be situated and understood. Making use of photography, visual methods, and fieldnotes as forms of data collection and analysis (Rose, 2016; Heng, 2016; 2017), this study followed established approaches from research at British military Airshows (see Rech, 2015) to “think about how representation as a set of practices helps us understand the spatialities of militarism” (Rech et al, 2015: 53). Such spatialities were found across Liverpool’s waterfront within three ‘military villages’: Army, RAF and Navy. Exploring these militarised spaces via analytic autoethnographic observation (Anderson, 2006) the construction, communication and reproduction of military economies, identities and materialities were found in abundance.

### **Military economies and disembodied harm**

It has been previously suggested by Danilova (2015: 92) that “ethnographic observation of Armed Forces Day in Nottingham in 2010” evidenced a twofold purpose of the event: first as a general military recruitment initiative, and second as a vehicle to raise awareness of, and generate fundraising for, military veteran charities. Both purposes were consistent during Armed Forces Day 2017. Indeed, following Basham (2016: 261), the recruitment initiatives to which Danilova (2015) referred served to “normalize the military and its violence in everyday life” by sharing military values, objects and technologies as a “social good”, orchestrated via staged military recruitment activities, objects and props.



Fig. 1.4 RAF village, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2017

“what is clearly evident is that Armed Forces Day is used as a modality for military recruitment of all ages ... I overheard in passing many military personnel discussing matters of joining the military with young people ... this was most noticeable in the RAF village, but had a clear presence throughout the events” (Fieldnotes, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

As Fig. 1.4 depicts, the promotion of ‘liberal militarism’ was an overt and evident feature throughout each military village across Liverpool’s waterfront, embodied via recruitment activities through the use of military vehicles, technologies and equipment. Similar to the civic space formerly occupied by an

Armed Forces recruiting office in Fig. 1.2, these recruitment activities are distinct from the ‘economic military geographies’ observed by Woodward (2000). Instead, stationing recruitment activities and props in each ‘village’ along Liverpool’s waterfront contributed to transforming this civic space into a liminal ‘military landscape’ during Armed Forces Day (see also Fig. 1.6 and 1.7); offering Woodward’s (2000) ‘economic military geographies’ some conceptual reconfiguration so they no longer rely solely on the permanence of military installations or settlements.



Fig. 1.5 Canada Boulevard, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2017

“... [a]ll of these stalls, in one way or another, coveted the realities and consequences of military service ... No children and parents seem to be queuing up to speak to those attending to these stalls, despite these being of critical importance to more completely understanding the potential consequences of joining the military” (Fieldnotes, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

Juxtaposed with these ongoing military recruitment activities, the pervasive consequences of successful military economies were found at Canada Boulevard; a transient space connecting military villages across Liverpool’s waterfront. Situated opposite mobile bars and food outlets, an assemblage of military veteran charities - as also observed by Danilova (2015) - can be seen in the blue and white tented stalls depicted in Fig. 1.5. Throughout this transient space, the social and structural consequences caused by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) successfully ‘raising an army’ of working-class boys and men, and girls and women, became sharply evident (qua Basham, 2016). This transient space is where the disembodied corporeality of military harm could be found, harm caused as a direct result of military service.



However, the offerings from these stalls of information leaflets and brochures to address military induced harms were more banal and less appealing to the publics passing by. These stalls were without the allure of any recruitment props - such as weapon systems - which were key attractions throughout each military village.

### **Women at ‘play’, men at ‘work’: identity politics and ‘transient aesthetic markers’**

As Woodward (200) points out, ‘military landscapes’ such as those hosting military bases and training areas give affordance to the construction of masculine military identities via either the industrialism or rurality of space. But, as noted, such landscapes are usually dependent upon the geographic fixity of military objects and installations. The urban landscape of Armed Forces Day 2017 removed these strictures to reproduce the imagined normative identity of the military (qua Basham, 2013) throughout liminal civic spaces. This was not only promoted and promulgated via the recruitment practices and activities that were taking place each day (Fig. 1.4 and Fig. 1.5), but facilitated further by gendered props and scripts depicting feminine and masculine caricatures.



Fig. 1.6 Army village, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2017

“... there was an overriding gendered emphasis to Armed Forces Day, manifest in the paternal, masculine and heteronormative identity of the military institution, none of which was attempted to be diversified when interacting with the public” (Fieldnotes, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

The perceptual narrative of a feminine script being constructed in the female mannequins in Fig. 1.6 for example are achieved via dashes of eye colour, ill-fitting webbing, combat uniform and civilian-like clothing, and the adornment of Union Flags and sports equipment instead of weapons. The various representations of women soldiers in this image depict the other passive and maternal ‘uses’ that women’s bodies are imagined possessing as relational non-combative subjects at ‘play’ in the military, performed dually as pacified *and* civilianised actors with lower status to those of male soldiers (Basham, 2013). The male mannequin in Fig. 1.7, adorned with netted combat helmet and tightly packed parachute regalia, situated next to a weapon system, camouflage netting, and male soldiers provides a different perceptual narrative for the masculine script of soldiering as ‘men’s work’ (Basham, 2013). This equating of “the military to the masculine in such a way as to render that relationship natural” and

‘naturalised’ (Woodward and Winter 2007: 103) contrasts with the feminised scripting of the female soldier in Fig. 1.6.



Fig. 1.7 Army village, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2017

“These observations act as a visual reminder of the particular ‘whiteness’ of the British Armed Forces, an identity which Basham (2013) has noted as being prioritised and prevailing; leaving other racial, ethnic and religious identities subjugated, ‘tolerated’ but not embraced within its paternal logic” (Fieldnotes, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

Through making such observations related to gender it became apparent that the myriad objects on display within the liminal space of each military village dually served to “perform an individual’s or collective’s ethnic identities” (Heng, 2015: 60). As depicted in Fig. 1.3, Fig. 1.6 and Fig. 1.7, it can be observed that throughout each ‘village’ during Armed Forces Day 2017 the military had successfully reproduced its own imagined monocultural, Caucasian and Imperialistic identity (Basham, 2013); achieved via various ‘transient aesthetic markers’ such as military standards, insignias, uniforms, military equipment and clothing (Heng, 2015). In addition to such symbolism and further representational indicators relating to class, paternalism, heteronormativity and masculinity on display as markers of the normative identity of the British military, there was also a distinct lack of diversity with regards to ‘race’, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and disability throughout Armed Forces Day 2017.

And so, despite the recent British Army recruiting campaign ‘This is Belonging’ championing a more diverse identity of its soldiers (see Karmarama, 2018), it became noticeable throughout Armed Forces Day 2017 that there was a lack of any sustained attempt by the military (more broadly defined) to observe and promote the intersectional identities of its personnel via their recruitment activities.

### **‘Sinews’, anchoring and prohibited space**

As found at British military Airshows, there were numerous ‘sinews’ (Rech and Williams, 2016) which attempted to connect members of the public to this imagined military identity during Armed Forces Day 2017. Some of which included take-away material artefacts such as maps and Union flags that were intended to be acquired and taken away from the liminal ‘military landscape’ established across Liverpool’s waterfront (Fig. 1.1, Fig. 1.6). Similar to objects found to be distributed at British military Airshows, these take-away artefacts allow show-goers to retain the depoliticised narratives of liberal militarism as keepsakes or mementoes, and remain connected to the values and scripts of a heteronormative military identity within their own private spaces (Rech and Williams, 2016). Other ‘sinews’ that also made these connections via touch and feel, and were by far the most attractive to show-goers, included the encouraged material and sensory interaction with military weapon systems.



Fig. 1.8 Army village, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2017

“The public seemed to be fully engaged in the materiality of military weapons and vehicles during both days, seemingly unaware or unknowing of the rarity and peculiarity of such violent weaponry being out of place in civic space” (Fieldnotes, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

As depicted in Fig. 1.8, the most pronounced interface with such objects throughout each military village was via the handling of rifles and other hand-held weapons. Serving as ‘material anchors’ (Heng, 2014) to signify how the military operates in its everyday practices (i.e. with logicity, functionality, discipline and repetition), these were objects not intended to be retained as personal mementoes. They were to be returned as military property and their material form constrained and held in place at recruitment stalls throughout the liminal ‘military landscape’ of Armed Forces Day 2017 (Fig. 1.8). Such exchanges as seen in Fig. 1.8 encouraged touch, feel, and interaction (i.e. arming and firing) with material artefacts that are unfamiliar in civic spaces; engagements which drew intrigue and surprise at the weight and feel of handling these regular military objects with unacquainted civilian hands. These objects were for interaction with, but not removal by, the publics encouraged to engage with them and the ‘sinews’ they intended to create were deliberately temporal rather than artefactual. But not all

weapon systems were present for the purposes of material and human interface. Having boarded the HMS Iron Duke docked in the River Mersey (Fig. 1.1, Fig. 1.9), I found myself moving from the liminal ‘military landscape’ co-opting Liverpool’s civic space, into a highly-constricted working military installation. Both these militarised and prohibited spaces were contiguous settings serving the activities espousing liberal militarism during Armed Forces Day 2017. However, it is here that the liminal ‘military landscape’ of Liverpool’s waterfront came to an end. The HMS Iron Duke was instead a prohibited MoD space literally - rather than ‘materially’ - anchored in the River Mersey, overlooking Liverpool’s civic waterfront as a steely military sentinel.



Fig. 1.9 HMS Iron Duke, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2017

“My movement has been restricted by entering MoD property and thereby being subject to a different set of rules and practices, indicated by the search of my bag, threat notification and armed sentries patrolling with loaded weapons; these weapons were, however, not for the public to interact with or be entertained by” (Fieldnotes, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

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