Blurred lines: intimacy, mobility, and the social military

Peter Adey, David Denney, Rikke Jensen and Alasdair Pinkerton

Department of Geography, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham, UK; School of Law, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham, UK

ABSTRACT
This paper, whilst drawing on a wide-scale exploration of social media use within the UK Armed Forces, narrates the visit of two academic researchers to a very particular military space: a Royal Navy warship. It does so in order to experience, question, and understand the extent to which social media cuts through the private, domestic or public, personal and familial, work and home in an intimate clinch of relations. We do so by exploring how the now-familiar story of the befuddlement of distance in contemporary conflict is complicated by remote communications and autonomous technologies. And we do so to explore the ways in which social media might refigure quite intimate and gendered social relations and practices. This narrative, we suggest, needs nuancing through the military lives, however far removed, who live closeness and distance in differentiated ways, particularly through their mobile phones, tablets, and computers. We explore, through a number of focus groups with naval personnel on board a military ship, how the reworking of military life is producing feelings of distance and isolation, but also togetherness and community. Indeed, as opposed to simply opening up once-intimate places to exposure and, thus, erasing geography, instead, places and spaces, and bodies, matter differently. Crucial to uncovering and understanding these relations are our own embodiments as researchers. We explore how we as academic researchers erode and rework these distinctions as we navigate, and inhabit, particular military spaces.

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A. Introduction

Owen Sheers’ visceral and haunting telling of Welsh soldiers recruited to the army, following their story through to deployment in Afghanistan, is a suitable starting point...
for this paper. This is a paper concerned with different sets of blurring boundaries within the UK military and its transformation through the apparent ubiquity of new forms of social media. Sheers’ stanza invites us into another view of military life and the distant geographies of conflict. His is a translation from ‘out there to back here’.

This paper deals with uncovering how social media on the one hand, and how we as researchers occupying complicated subject positions in our relation to the military on the other, are able to cross over into and inhabit military spaces – without forgetting that we are already, to some extent, militarized subjects. It ties into an extensive study on the use of social media technologies by members of the Royal Navy, the British Army, and the Royal Air Force, and their families. Our engagement with the UK Armed Forces is thus characterized by a series of separate encounters with military personnel and the spaces they inhabit to explore the blurring of lines and lives within military spaces. This paper is based on one such encounter with Royal Navy personnel on board a naval ship (and with the ship itself, a Type 45 Destroyer) as it was docked for scheduled repair at Her Majesty’s Naval Base (HMNB) Portsmouth in late 2014. It therefore draws on material emerging from a particular research visit to a particular military space at a particular moment in time. Through focus groups with the seamen and -women who live and work in this quite distinctive space, we learn how social media complicates a variety of boundaries and separations, such as those between home and away, professional and familial life, and organizational with social hierarchies, as well as public and private spaces. In tracing our own movement onto and within the ship, we narrate our embodied experiences as we ourselves cross thresholds and blur boundaries.

The import for militaries is substantial. As anthropologist Kenneth MacLeish has suggested, military lives are precisely defined by many such thresholds and distinctions, such as, he writes,

between soldier and civilian, enlisted and officer, those who had deployed and those who hadn’t, the injured and the healthy, the green and the experienced, the ignorant and the wise, the dedicated and the lazy, those who saw combat and those who stayed inside the wire, soldiers and spouses, and men and women. (2013, 49)

Following MacLeish’s observations, our research is concerned with the blurring of such boundaries and distinctions between – we will show – our embodied subject positions and the intimate places and atmospheres of military space that are being rearticulated through social media. As MacLeish already suggests, such boundaries sit uneasily between the spheres of military institutions, personnel and their families, friends and social networks, and the wider public. We are interested in the boundaries that shape the ways in which military lives are lived, and how such lines blur, or even shift, through the practices, meanings, and experiences associated with social media. In other words, social media could be said to produce a diverse set of flows, conduits, and spaces through which military lives are now lived, expressed, and debated. We see these tendencies portending to not only the creep of militarization into the most private of places as a one-way street (although see Enloe’s [2000] more nuanced account), but a much more unpredictable flow moving both ways between the private, military, and public. We account for far more vortical flows of personal, social, familial, and domestic
relations coming to inhabit military space in uneven ways, pulling down old boundaries while erecting new ones.

In many ways, it has taken our own physical encounters with military spaces and personnel to realize these relations through our own embodiments and subject positions occupied through the course of the research. Our concerns lie within the insights of a feminist critique of militaries and militarism which have posed far greater scrutiny on the involvement and inscription of bodies by and within military organizations, to which our bodies became arguably subjected. Our interests extend beyond an initial recognition that we as researchers become components in a process of muddying or muddling lines in terms of method, positionality, and access. We juxtapose our academic, exploratory mobilities as putatively civilian researchers on a naval ship with the conduits and contours of social and professional military lives. We do so with reference to, and with evidence of, our own embodied navigation through this particular military space, what is essentially a honeycomb of cramped rooms and corridors, professional, private, semi-private, and social places. The paper thus reflects on the boundaries and thresholds that must, inevitably, be negotiated by academics seeking to research ‘inside the wire’ (or inside the hull in this case). How are we to access and navigate military institutions and networks, which make particular demands of our apparently non-military bodies, relatively unused to being immersed in military space and its physical affordances and codes of conduct (formal and informal)?

Indeed, it is arguable whether any of our findings would be possible without this level of access, permission, and proximity. Of course, what this proximity has meant for our ethical relationship to the research demands further examination, but this is outside the scope of this paper. We ask how we can advance our understanding of the intimate and embodied spaces of military life, and the means by which academic research can go about researching them.

To begin, we explore some of the extant literature on social media itself, before outlining our approach towards military spaces, embodiment, and intimacy. The next section describes the coeval development of social media within the military, and efforts to govern them, with the evolution of the modern military base. Finally, we narrate our navigation of the naval ship and our engagement with the men and women inhabiting it, recounting our experiences through more or less formal personal encounters and focus groups on board.

B. The social military

In this section we situate the ‘social military’ as both our characterization of the contemporary military, and a set of conceptual and methodological approaches which we intend to draw and build upon. First, we identify a series of wider debates about social media and their potential transformation of military social relations. Second, we outline how the turn to interrogate military spaces presents a different series of methodological and ethical challenges for how we are able to investigate militaries and social media. Both sets of debates, we go on to suggest in the third part to this section, might be brought productively into relation with wider writings on intimacy, mobility, and embodiment.
Understanding social media

Our engagement with the military informs our assessment of a wider set of writings which contextualize our research. The role of print, television, film, and new media in shaping and reshaping representations of military life has been widely examined (Jenkings et al. 2011; Maltby 2013). Yet there has been far less research that has explored the ways in which social media is rearticulating how militaries – personnel and their families – experience and live their lives.

It is not as if the military exists in isolation from broader forms of social and cultural change as they pertain to digital technologies, family mobilities, and their social and material practices (Urry 2007; Holdsworth 2013). The military, characterized by the high mobility of its workforce, as much as any other institution, also exists within a network society where social media technologies can produce more complex social networks, and potentially undermine established organizational structures and hierarchies (van Dijk 2013). Of course, changes in the character of networked life have been widely acknowledged to have shaped what militaries call battlespace (Graham 2009; Gregory 2010; Der Derian 2009; Coward 2009). But these perspectives on battlespace from political geography and international relations have tended, although not exclusively, to operate at the level of military doctrine, technology, and strategy. Relying solely on such apertures arguably reproduces those of the military, and inures these privileged sites to the possibilities of social change and potential critical political engagement. Less well understood are the more banal, but no less important, uses of social media networks by military personnel, and their families and friends. Such a perspective on militaries during peace and conflict is necessary if we are to broaden and deepen such on-going narratives.

Social media gives rise to novel modes of constant, negotiated, and mediated interactions through what Licoppe (2004) calls absent presence or connected relationships (see also Katz and Aakhus 2002). Previously made possible through letters and ‘blueys’, asynchronous contact has been made differently synchronous – often instant, and just as often deferred, delayed, and fuzzy through the provision of new communications tools to deployed troops. In the last couple of decades, the range of communication tools has changed. Beginning in the 1990s, the long-standing dominance of the letter was initially challenged following the introduction of telephone services (e.g. NATO operations in Bosnia), e-Blueys, and, more recently, access to email, internet-based services, and social media.

Alex Lambert (2013, 77) notes that Facebook in particular functions as a means of connecting ‘distanced’ social ties, whilst Wajcman points to the capacity of social media to collapse space and distance, and to ‘disrupt what we once thought of as boundaries between public and private, work and family, labor and leisure’ (2014, 123). The lines of division between places – whether the home, or the geography of the camp in the UK or overseas – however, have not simply ceased to exist. They have shifted, as notions of distance and absence continue to be re-articulated.

What could all of this mean for military lives? Writers such as MacLeish (2013) have emphasized the burdens of the attachments of military kinship. Militaries are held together by the ‘lived affects’ of intimacy, codified as morale, espirit de corps, and other
terms we often associate with the felt, embodied, and communal experiences of a military bond (McNeill 1997). This kinship has come to rule over home life and the ‘military family’ with what MacLeish calls the ‘substance of intimacy’ (MacLeish 2013, 159). The relations we have described potentially muddy and muddle these attachments, bringing disparate (potentially domestic) spaces and attachments of friends and family to military spaces and vice versa. Or, for Turkle (2011), social media may drive not connectivity but isolation, noting that notions of absence and separation may be reinforced, not removed.

The gradual infiltration of social media in military workings has predominantly been driven by military personnel, rather than the military institution. Whilst Facebook is used by the majority of personnel and most military families, WhatsApp has been informally integrated into some military units to distribute messages within work teams, replacing traditional top-down communication channels. Military personnel have also found innovative ways of connecting using different mobile devices. Characteristics of military life, such as the closeness of a military unit, or the frequent experiences of separation, might prove markedly exposed to the new set of currents, channels, and spaces generated by digital and mobile communication technologies. Indeed, the existing social and organizational structures of the military could be undermined by the availability of social media, bypassing established levels of rank and status. A destabilization of hierarchical structures might, therefore, become a necessary trade-off in lieu of instant connectivity and the advantages (or disadvantages) that this entails.

Equally, the social and cultural bonds of camaraderie that constitute modern militaries could be enhanced through social media practices – albeit over potentially greater geographical distances – by creating a shared space where such bonds can be maintained. And yet it would be too simplistic to assume that the familial and social bonds that MacLeish and many others have described could be simply copied through social media connectivities and spatialities. Rather, it might be helpful to think that the military’s relationship with social media produces distinct spaces where ‘connected relationships’ (Licoppe 2004) are sustained and performed; where notions of privacy and community, intimacy, and solitude are reworked and dislocated (Gordon and e Silva 2011); and where novel modes of social interaction and embodied practices are evolving in ways that are blurring old social-spatial boundaries, while creating new ones.

We label these re-articulations of social-media, through which processes of militarization are being negotiated, ‘the social military’. The term recognizes that the military was certainly ‘social’ before, but in more analog and less intensive, extensive, and participatory ways. In this sense, the social military is the newest iteration of the erosion and crucial remaking of the boundaries, distinctions, and demarcations which have characterized military life.

**Negotiating the field**

Working with the military has been a central component of the ethos and conduct of our research. Rather than undertake distanced research from a dispassionate perspective, as if we could look in from afar, or for our work simply to bolster the sharpening of theories and concepts, we have embarked upon ‘direct engagement with military forces’ and adopted ‘a critical approach to those encounters’ (Rech et al. 2015, 10). While there is
much more to say about this, it is important to note that we have walked the difficult line of a process best understood as cooperative. While our research interests and questions were our own, we sought to engage military communities which ranged from policy makers within the Ministry of Defence (MOD) to the communities of personnel and families (including family liaison officers), our co-founders, and others with our questions. These were almost always interests that evolved through those conversations and a deepening in our understanding of military life. In other moments we had to quite strongly assert an empirical approach that these military communities were simply less used to valuing, such as qualitative methodologies ranging from interviews to focus groups. To some extent, the closeness of our perspective to actual military lives, their experiences, and their practices quite radically departed from research the military communities with whom we have liaised were used to working with. We frequently found that it was also not what some military interests were necessarily concerned with, our research not being seen as ‘strategic’.

The social military is not necessarily waiting for researchers to investigate or uncover; neither does it reside in spaces and places that are simple to find or explicate. Jenkings et al. (2011) point towards the relative neglect of the qualitative experiential dimensions of military life. That social media technologies are blurring these spheres of public and private life poses difficult questions for research methodology and the knotty issues of access. Yet we recognize, as other military scholars have argued, that to explore the production of the relations we are interested in we must turn ‘to the spaces and places in which they are constituted, and through which they are expressed’ (Rech et al. 2015, 11).

Our negotiation of entry to military spaces requires a transgression of social-spatial boundaries. Whilst part of this research could have been conducted online, our approach rested on an assumption that only by being present in military spaces could we begin to observe the often-hidden experiences of military life, and the subtleties and nuances with which social media is negotiated and utilized. In this sense, our project has demanded several ethnographic encounters both virtually and through our experience of military spaces.

Negotiating a field site, however, opens up further questions and conceptual debate about our methodological role as placed and embodied researchers. Military security policies often help rationalize deliberations over the possibility of access, just as these spaces have been argued to reproduce and intensify already existing inequalities on the lines of class, race, and particularly gender (Enloe 2000; Woodward 1998). What would encountering these sites really mean, and in what ways might it help us to illuminate or make sense of their social media practices? Our response to these challenges of apprehending military spaces and military lives has been to turn to feminist engagements, amongst others, which have opened out particular attunements to intimacy, mobility, and embodiment (Woodward 1998; see also Pearson 2012).

**Intimacy, mobility, and embodiment**

We attend conceptually and methodologically to what feminist and queer scholarship has deemed ‘intimacy’ (Berlant 1998; Povinelli 2006). Geographers Oswin and Olund have described intimacy as ‘a sense of self in close connection to others, other selves or other things that inhabits that elusive space somewhere between a purely solipsistic
“me” and a wholly subsuming “us” (2010, 60). Such an attention, as Pain and Staeheli argue so forcefully on a feminist geopolitics of intimacy (2014), writing partly from the subject of domestic violence, could be to realize particular spaces such as the body or household; certain forms of relations of interaction, such as emotion; and particular sets of practices, such as care.

These writings have sought to trouble several binary assumptions and boundaries associated with intimacy, rather than dividing out certain kinds of violence as local, personal, and everyday, or as global and international. For Pain and Staeheli, this renders the geopolitical – what they seek to conjoin with intimacy – as primary through a masculine hierarchy of power, as opposed to the geopolitical being exposed ‘as already created by and consisting of relations and practices of intimacy’ (2014, 345). In this sense, the highly gendered domestic, or the body, could be reworked in a way that relates the personal to the global, and using certain kinds of practices that might bridge the close with the distant.

This helps us in seeking to account for forms of military social relations that we could understand as intimate, because of the ambivalent way they involve particular ‘coming-together, gelling, or coupling’, as Galloway (2010, 67) puts it. These intimacies, altered and made possible by social media – and even its absence – involve complex blurrings of personal, public, and private, as well as the possibility of the reinstatement of other demarcations. To go further, in response to changes in social media, Hjorth and Lim (2012, 478) have described the possibility of a kind of ‘mobile intimacy’, or the ‘overlaying of the material-geographic and electronic-social’, in which the intimacies existing between family, friends, and lovers are already social and cultural.

What this means is that through our attention to the military’s social media practices, spaces, disparate scales, and, of course, mobilities, we could conceive of intimacy as constitutive of crucially important experiences (from bullying to social cliques, and befriending outside rank) and relations transforming military life, its structures, and its power relations. An attention to intimacy attunes us to the entanglement of distant and proximate relations with others, which social media appears to be radically amplifying and changing through enhanced encounters and expectancies, to the potentially intimate spatialities and embodiments which are produced with and through them. Given that many scholars regard the intimacies of the military family and its organization as resembling relations of kinship (MacLeish 2013), any effect on the military’s intimate relations could have wider implications on issues ranging from well-being to personnel morale, organizational communications, or the conduct of operations.

Methodologically, an attention to the places and locations wherein military relations are performed demands that we become, albeit temporarily, intimate with those spaces, body and all, and draw on approaches that allow us to do so. In particular, it turns our focus to the spaces and places of domesticity that may often remain silent within studies of the military, whether they are the familial spaces of back ‘home’ that appear to ‘haunt’ (Valentine 2008) the far away, or the close and private places inhabited by military bodies themselves, such as private bunk beds and single rooms. Social media is not a disembodied virtual space.

During our visit to the ship, we adopted an ethnographic approach to our navigation and mobility through the ship’s spaces, whilst our focus groups on board the ship also functioned as ethnographic settings, where we attuned to the socio-spatial relations of
the place in which they were set (Sin 2003). We also reflect on the usual separation of military spaces from civilian domains and how our physical presence in such spaces could challenge the usual division between military and public places.

Attuning to intimacy also demands our reflexivity as differently abled, aged, and gendered body-subjects, to our encounters with military spaces and environments. Such issues pose particular demands on our ability to understand the co-option and enrolment of different kinds of raced and gendered bodies, including our own (Basham 2013; Woodward and Winter 2007). These demands have important implications for our interest in social media, as we try to understand the ways in which social media alters the experiences of military personnel and their families, and the ways that difference is lived through these new mediations.

In the next section, we explore the relationship between the military’s grasp of social media technologies to tendencies within the military organization, especially within its bases. We will discuss our movements to inhabit the spaces of one particular military setting, crossing numerous social and geographic thresholds in what could be described as an informal ‘mobile methodology’ (Büscher and Urry 2009; see Paasche and Sidaway 2010 on a mobile security ‘transect’). We explore this navigation as a negotiation of other boundaries and subject positions. As MacLeish has explained of his own ethnographic work, getting access was not a simple matter of being ‘in’, so to speak, but rather ‘skating along an edge of inside and outside, an edge that tracked across multiple sites, people, encounters and indeed ways of being in’ (2013, 49).

C. The shifting social (media) spaces of the UK military

The military base is a suitable foundation for understanding the places and geographies that bind together military lives, on the one hand, and the social media currents that increasingly pervade, and are woven into, these structures, on the other. The evolution of the military base and its infrastructure, and the increasing availability of social media connectivities, are not antagonistic but reinforcing. A number of recent initiatives have influenced the ways in which work and private space is understood, structured, and utilized within the UK military. As part of a wide-scale upgrade of bed spaces and common areas for military personnel on bases, the Single Living Accommodation Modernisation (SLAM) project was put in place. This has seen old military spaces gain new functions in order to provide personal and private, rather than shared, living space for serving personnel without partners or families.

At first glance, this transformation of military space strengthens the notion of increasingly individualized military personnel. Understood in connection with other initiatives such as ‘Pay As You Dine’, introduced in 2006 to make personnel pay for what they eat and to give them the option to buy food off-base, and the ‘Open Door Policy’, meant to encourage junior ranks to communicate with their commanding officer, it fosters the perception of a growing set of policies aimed at encouraging individuality within the Armed Forces. Indeed, it creates a distinct demarcation between privatized space and communal space.

The way the UK military portrays SLAM has obviously not been by deploying representations of social isolation but through the benefits of mobile connectivity and modern communications infrastructure, integrated in the large-scale construction and
refurbishment projects that SLAM constitutes within the defence estate. Found within the first design guidance for the scheme produced by the UK military, emphasis was given to private spaces to relax, rest, work, and, importantly, connect. The telecom provider BT’s provision of ‘MOD wi-fi’ throughout the new accommodation was a response to the military’s realization of a number of existing problems and challenges: poor internet connectivity within many military bases; the inefficiency of fixed-line infrastructure given the transient nature of many temporary military buildings; and, in light of the constant mobility of personnel, the inappropriateness of fixed-term contracts. ‘The internet is a lifeline, so the MOD wi-fi solution from BT is ‘hugely popular’, quotes one report.

Within this wider context of UK military restructuring, the New Employment Model has seen a growing number of military families live away from bases in private houses within non-military communities. Service personnel have been given government subsidies to purchase their own homes through interest-free loans under the Forces Help to Buy scheme, in addition to the government’s general scheme for first-time buyers. So far, 5000 military families have bought their own homes through this scheme, with the MOD hoping that this number will continue to increase.

The significance of the base as a place for social interaction amongst military personnel (see Lutz 2002 for a perspective of the base in the context of suburban America; Bernazzoli and Flint 2010) is, thus, quickly diminishing, and these developments are increasingly tied to access to digital communication. This is particularly evident at overseas bases and in places where access to communications technology was previously limited. One could argue that the military base is increasingly being debased.

Such reorganizations of military life and living seem geared towards facilitating distinct individual and private spaces for Service personnel. Traditional notions of social cohesion tied to geographic proximity amongst Service personnel, albeit through gendered and exclusionary socialization practices (Basham 2013), are being challenged by both the online and offline geographies of military living, as the military institution is becoming increasingly diversified and fragmented as more and more communication transcends the boundaries of the military institution, potentially eroding military camaraderie and cohesion. As noted by a soldier who complained to his superior about the integration of SLAM into the Army: ‘We don’t socialize. We don’t communicate anymore’ (Army, Junior Rank, interview conducted in 2014).

D. Blurring boundaries on the ship

To explore the ways in which access to social media has altered a particular military space and the lives of those inhabiting that space, we focus on a naval ship. This is an 8000-tonne Type 45 Destroyer, which has a complement of 190 personnel and is designed for anti-air warfare with a capability to defend sophisticated targets. This Royal Navy ship is the first to incorporate ‘gender-neutral living spaces’ which means it offers flexible spaces – such as individual shower cubicles and shared living accommodation – that can accommodate both male and female sailors, although men and women continue to sleep in separate spaces. Space within the ship is subject to military governance, strictly controlled, and only rarely punctuated by non-military bodies and
practices. It is therefore a very particular military space, distinct naval personnel, and a particular set of practices that greet us – two academic researchers – on a rainy November day in 2014.

**On board the warship**

When we boarded the ship, it had recently returned from a 6-month deployment tour. It was in dock and undergoing extensive repairs. We found the ship in a transient state. There was evidence of the widespread construction work both inside and outside the ship itself. So, although the permanent architecture was intact, this highly militarized space appeared interrupted by non-military bodies performing what could be perceived as non-military activities – such as painting internal and external walls, refitting shower and toilet facilities, testing control systems, and repairing damaged components. The functionality of the ship as a battleship was thus limited, and the routines and activities of crew members were unlike those performed during deployment. What we observed, therefore, related to a very specific moment in the ship’s life cycle. We were not observing operational duties. And our embodiment of the space and engagement with its crew was thus configured within and around the physical structures of the ship as well as its current state and status.

Two of us were granted access to the ship: one female, non-British, junior academic with previous experience of being on a warship, and one male, British, senior academic with no previous experience of being on a warship. Both of us were subject to the same security checks and no distinction was made between the levels of access granted. Before going aboard the ship we were supplied with safety helmets, in a bright yellow colour, making us yet more identifiable and distinguishable from naval personnel.

Throughout our visit on the ship, which lasted around 3 hours, our movement was directed by a Senior Navy Officer. The reason for this was never stated explicitly, although there seemed to be some degree of making sure that we did not cause harm to ourselves, or to anyone else on the ship, whilst in this unfamiliar and potentially risky space. Perhaps because of this level of scrutiny and attention, we were perceived as one entity: as non-members. Although our individual bodies bear distinct characteristics, these were not apparent or at the centre of attention within this space.

Our presence was not natural to the space. Whilst the ship resembled a building site with military and non-military bodies working within close proximity, it remained a highly militarized environment where military machinery dominates personal living spaces. This ship, as well as others, could be conceived as an assemblage of bodies, technologies, and relations (Law 1984; see Hawkins 2015 deploying this characterization of the materialization of leadership in the Navy). This mingling creates risks, which are constantly anticipated through the formal and informal regulation of conduct. We observed prominent printed and verbal instructions and warnings of imminent risks and dangers. Before being allowed onto the ship, we had to pass through the makeshift security office located on the dock, where we received a security brief and were advised on how to move around the ship. We were shown photographs, attached to a notice board, depicting different warning signs and were informed of their specific meaning and purpose. The brief was rehearsed. It is given to all non-military personnel visiting the ship. This is, again, an indicator of how we are perceived, not as individuals
but as a collective, and how we are made to feel that we are a certain risk to the military. This is not to say that such procedures are alienating, or even unfriendly, yet they construct a framework within which we had to operate and through which our bodies were more or less pliable to the temporalities and regularities of military space.

Once we entered the ship, we observed written notices which instructed us to secure the hatches to the lower decks and to keep doors separating the different work spaces closed. These appeared obsolete, however. Most doors and hatches separating the decks remained open, as personnel moved through the corridors and up and down the ladders between the living and work spaces. Notably, this is something which both of our bodies were unable to do, requiring in some instances help. The internal, informal and formal, regulatory framework is determined by the position and activity of the ship, with fewer barriers obstructing on-board movement when the ship is in dock.

By occupying these spaces, we were ourselves blurring the lines between military and non-military and between public and private, as we navigated to areas beyond any perspective we might have had looking in from the apparent ‘outside’, even if those perspectives were relatively staged by military personnel (see Maltby 2013 on the front- and backstage performances of the mediatized military). Our mobile and bodily encounter with the ship’s geography established, in other ways, our position as outsiders not conforming to the shape, comportments, skills, and learnt practices of naval bodies (McSorley 2012; Sasson-Levy 2003; Fluri 2011; Woodward and Winter 2007). Moving through the ship visibly exemplified our outsider status, as our non-military bodies struggled to operate the ship’s heavy doors, steep ladders, and confined spaces at the same speed as those bodies familiar with the architecture of the ship. Yet our outsider status was not only limited to the performance of our non-naval bodies. Individual identifiers and visual signifiers such as gender, ethnicity, age, previous military experience, and our position as academics contribute to the dynamic process of negotiation and re-negotiation of status.

**Intimate spaces**

Aware of the (long-established) absence of divisions between work and living spaces within a naval vessel, we observed how living spaces were socially segregated by rank, with Senior Rates and Officers occupying more living space than those in the junior ranks.¹² Our visit to one of the living spaces occupied by six junior rates, with their bunk spaces and adjoining communal washroom facilities, demonstrates how space itself becomes a rare resource. We saw that the interior was divided into large functional rooms, some of which are expansive, yet dominated by equipment and machinery. Loudspeakers, located throughout, were constantly used to relay information to individuals and to larger units, thus punctuating the conversations between crew members and disrupting the otherwise unbroken noise of working machinery. Sleeping and eating spaces for naval personnel we found were cramped and indistinguishable.

The living spaces constituted a constant reminder that we were forever moving between private, personal, and work spaces, crossing over and between existing lines of utility, sociality, and function. Moving across and down into the ship’s bowels, we
learnt that as with the modifications to the defence estate on land, the boundaries have shifted between public and personal space in the life of the ship, as noticed and commented upon by those seamen and -women who know ‘how it used to be’ in the experience of communal and collective ways of living in places such as the mess, as explained here by a Senior Rate:

There was a point in having the 52-man big mess deck. When someone was new, and in a brand-new environment, they weren’t alone, they weren’t unmonitored, and someone would notice if they were starting to lose it. Whereas now, for modern pressures and so on [the messes] are getting smaller and smaller. (Royal Navy, Senior Rate, interview conducted in 2014)

The close physical proximity and visibility of group communal living is here celebrated for its capacity to encourage the collective care that militaries are known for. Smaller mess space and sleeping quarters accommodating up to six staff members make for the creation of smaller social groupings than was the case when military personnel lived more collectively and communally in larger rooms designed for eating, recreation, and sleeping areas and mess facilities. A Senior Rate told us: ‘There was one big mess deck with one big TV. You would get readers that would sit by themselves but they were few and far between, but now everyone sees that space as my space’ (Royal Navy, Senior Rate, interview conducted in 2014). The import of this almost-nostalgia is a potential loss of group togetherness and military cohesion.

The gradual erosion of these kinds of spaces by organizational restructuring, where heavy machinery and sophisticated technologies take priority over social and living spaces, formed the landscape to our conversation with personnel about their social media interactions. We sat around a big table in what appeared to be one of the communal galleys (kitchens), in order to talk to junior and senior rates and officers, separated according to rank. The different groups we encountered were made up of both male and female sailors. Sitting down reduced our feelings of bodily inferiority as our inability to move with ease around the ship was not exposed. Partially hiding our bodies under the table created a sense of security for us as outsiders. Although we were embodying a more or less unfamiliar space, sitting down around a table would place our bodies in a familiar position.

Around the table, we were told about the experiences and practices of being on deployment at sea. Clear routines are in place. Eating and sleeping punctuate the structure of the day with collective activities enhancing a sense of collective identities. We were told how organized events help to interrupt life aboard the ship; however, film projectors and film shows have now been replaced by far more individualized and custom-made film viewing within privatized bunk spaces. Indeed, on board the Type 45 Destroyer, communal showers and sleeping accommodation have given way to individual cubicles and bunk spaces. One Senior Rate told us: ‘your bunk space is sort of your own movie centre. You can have everything in there. And all the cables under the mattress…it’s almost like a microwave’. We were reminded that the ship is not only a place of work but a place of social interactions, with social media providing a space, not restricted by physical or hard boundaries, where such interactions can take place.
**Constant communication**

We should also be reminded that the ship itself is mobile, moving in and out of national and international spaces, ports, boundaries, and jurisdictions, and, of course, access to communications. Although wi-fi is not available on the ship, personnel are provided with 30 minutes’ worth of communication each week (phone calls or online access through hardwired communal computers), with which they negotiate expectations of constant communication. Email and telephone communication, thus, remain the most-used modes of external communication on board the ship, for personal and work uses. The lack of wi-fi access on the ship, which is predominantly down to resources, makes naval personnel keen internet users at times when they are not restricted by the lack of onboard connectivity. Social media and other forms of online communications hold a crucial function for the lives of most seamen and -women. This is particularly evident at times when the confinements of the ship itself are broken: either during weekends ashore when on deployment, or when the ship moves into mobile phone signal range close to shore. Following Stephen Graham (2004), the physical location of the ship provides further evidence that social media is not virtual, or disembodied either – following some kind of ‘dream of transcendence’ – but thoroughly grounded in particular infrastructures and locations.

The almost ritual-like practices that happen around the use of social media, as noted above in relation to Wajcman (2014, 123), appear to be unsettling existing practices of group socializing that rely upon physical and communal contact, dress, touch, and mobility away from the ship, rather than being apart from them. This is emphasized by one Senior Rate’s bemoaning of the static comportment of many forms of social media interaction that appear to be insulating the individual from intimacy with others. ‘Home’ and ‘away’ no longer have the same distinction. The interpersonal relationships between naval personnel, that rely so much on proximity and the close quarters of naval life, are believed to be gradually eroding, depleting opportunities to let off steam:

In the navy, you deploy but then every couple of weekends you come in and you get a bit of time ashore in your civvies. Before, this would be your time, as work mates, to get on and have a few pints and just enjoy each other’s company without the pressures of work. You don’t get any of that anymore. You just see everyone sat around on the wi-fi, Facebooking, Skyping, headphones on. All of that takes over. So, you lose a lot of that social side of…sort of de-stressing. (Royal Navy, Senior Rate, interview conducted in 2014)

Some Service personnel describe the well-known isolation from family and friends within an institution characterized by its mobility (Burrell et al. 2006) as a welcome relief, whilst others regard communication with family, whether through telephone conversations, emails, or social media, as being a ‘human right’. One possible consequence of this is the development of a ‘culture of constant communication’, as one Senior Officer noted: ‘there’s a culture of constant communication and a lot of the youngsters joining can’t handle it’. The relentless need to be in constant contact with others, whether they are friends, family, or colleagues, as facilitated by social media and other communications technology, places difficult expectations, pressures, and loyalties on new personnel.

We learnt that the rhythms of social media use soon align to the rhythms of the ship’s mobility and the bodies of its personnel. Going into a port, or even moving close
to shore and finding a mobile phone signal, means personnel must become used to different temporalities of contact. Such opportunities, however, also present seemingly uncontrollable channels of instant communication for senior officers. A Senior Officer characterized – and, arguably, pathologized – the building up of an affective or atmospheric pressure, to be defused or relieved on returning to shore by the valve of social media communication: ‘Because we don’t have any access to it on the ship, it doesn’t go through any of our filters; as soon as they go ashore, they almost binge upload’ (Royal Navy, Senior Officer, 2014).

The mobilities of the ship and its personnel, in the midst of the constant noise and pressures to communicate, appear to produce contradictory social obligations, between the sustenance and gendered equality of family life and the maintaining of military bonds. Private troubles are immediately communicated to naval personnel by family members and friends, making the more traditional support networks created by social solidarity amongst crew members, to a certain extent, obsolete. The pressure of being in contact with ‘home’ was also highlighted by one Junior Rate:

> When I’m ashore with my mates I want to go to the waterpark or whatever, but it’s almost expected that I will be in contact. I don’t want to be in contact. I’ve got no news to tell. But I’ll get an earful because such and such have contacted home. And I’m like: how have they been in contact? Well, because of Facebook. People upload photos and stuff on Facebook. I don’t want to do that. I want to have that to myself. That’s what I want to do. It should have no relation to back home, but because of the social network my wife can almost tell me exactly where I’ve been, and when I was meant to be on duty. (Royal Navy, Junior Rate, 2014)

These thoughts constitute quite common and gendered apprehensions that social media effectively enables low-level surveillance from home, and the characterization of a nagging wife, placing strain on intimate ties when ‘away’, no longer means what it once did. Within the military the intensity of social networks, and the relationships that may endure sustained apartness, are significantly tested as those networks penetrate the intimacies of home and work.

### E. Conclusion: the social military

This paper has begun to explore a series of encounters with a particular military space. We examined a warship, the men and women who inhabited that space, and the penetration of social media into naval life and living. The ways in which the traditional boundaries of the military institution are being blurred and rearticulated are constituted by particular geographies of space, place, temporality, and the body. Social media is reconfiguring how military spaces and bodies are ordered, and what were more or less distinct separations between work, private, and family life have been not just blurred but reconfigured in ways which are gendered and potentially exclusionary through bullying and social cliques, as well as producing alternative forms of togetherness. We have suggested that this offers quite a different perspective to other contemporary framings of militaries and communications, and potentially disrupts the extent to which the UK military understands and recognizes the importance of social media to its personnel.

We have indicated that these tendencies follow a much wider tendency within the military itself. Running alongside the greater access to social media connectivities, as
well as an expectation to be able to use them, is the recognition that how the military provides accommodation for work as well as living is focusing much more on individualization – the privacy of the individual – and taking attention away from group communal living on military bases. Social media appears to be enhancing and intensifying these already existing trajectories, and critical military studies appears well placed to explore the experiences and social implications of these somewhat contradictory moves.

If this account has helped produce a sense that intimacy is caught up in a web of relations which we might conceive of as an assemblage, we should also recognize, as Oswin and Olund argue, that intimacy is frequently bound up as a ‘bridge’ to wider relations of power, to which they turn to Foucault’s notion of a ‘dispositive’ in order to apprehend intimacy as an object of governance, ‘as a productive, relational conduct of self to self, and of self to other’ (2010, 61). Scholarship within critical military studies should recognize this targeting of intimacies within military governance. Our encounter with the intimacies of the ship, through our mobility, bodies, and interactions, has illuminated how certain branches of the military highlight such intimacies as problems for governance, seeking to regulate their personnel’s engagement with their social spaces (whether the mess or social media) in order to do more than preserve security: to shape conduct. As we have seen, the embodied and spatial intimacies of personnel, and even our own, may prove excessive to that intervention.

Studying military practices from inside the military, albeit as outsiders, required a willingness to accept certain limiting measures. We submitted to the rules and codes of conduct of military spaces, and inhabited, however temporarily, the corridors and comportments of military bodies, even if we felt alienated from them, and inadequate. Indeed, our negotiations over access to personnel and military places force further reflections around the bureaucratic and administrative guidelines, technologies, and spaces that our research ethics and practice have been subjected to.

There are, moreover, further implications for how critical military scholarship is conducted. In taking seriously the intimacies of social media use, we attempted to access and make sense of the lines, trajectories, and blurring of boundaries by indicating how our own embodiments, mobilities, and negotiations of subject positions have been essential to our research. Only by navigating the ship in the way we did were we able to make sense of the very material construction and reconstruction of those boundaries and demarcations. Our own relations with the ship were, perhaps, never intimate but partly distanced. Only through our embodied mobility of the ship could we become cognizant of the parallel redrawing of boundaries around us as embodied researchers, working however easily or uncomfortably inside and outside the military and its spaces: the social military.

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Notes

1. By ‘social media’ we are following the general definition that users are able to ‘exchange’, ‘share’, and ‘modify’ content within a public or semi-public digitally mediated community, and form social networks through that community.

2. A ‘bluey’ is an aerogram (on blue paper) provided for deployed personnel and their families which can be posted through the British Forces Post Office. The ‘e-bluey’ is the electronic version of this and was introduced by the British military in 2000.

3. The evolution of the military’s social media guidelines, uneven training for personnel and families identified in our wider study of all three Services, and quite shock-provoking educational videos provide other insight into certain military efforts in place to shape and govern social media use.

4. ‘Single Living Accommodation’, House of Commons Select Committee, Fifth Report, July 2007, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmdfence/535/53502.htm; see also ‘The Armed Forces Covenant in Action? Part 2: Accommodation – Defence Committee’, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmdfence/331/33106.htm.

5. In our fieldwork, this was criticised by a number of junior ranks across the Services and described as a closed- rather than open-door policy.

6. ‘Service personnel morale soars with wi-fi internet’, Case Study MOD Wi-fi, http://www.globalservices.bt.com/uk/en/casestudy/mod_openzone [accessed May 2015].

7. ‘Service Personnel Morale Soars with Wi-Fi Internet’, Case Study MOD Wi-fi, http://www.globalservices.bt.com/uk/en/casestudy/mod_openzone [accessed May 2015].

8. ‘The New Employment Model’, MOD Guidance https://www.gov.uk/new-employment-model [accessed May 2015].

9. ‘Forces Help to Buy”, MOD Guidance, https://www.gov.uk/forces-help-to-buy [accessed May 2015].

10. MOD, “Forces Help to Buy Gets 5000 Service People on the Property Ladder”, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/forces-help-to-buy-gets-5000-service-people-on-the-property-ladder [accessed December 2015]. This mobility, which has traditionally characterised many military lives, is, thus, being confronted by a new reality where the New Employment Model introduces ‘greater geographic and domestic stability’ and ‘realistic lifestyle choice based on employment, stability and location factors’.

11. This is, of course, Law’s classic examination of the Portuguese sailing vessel in the context of colonial and imperialist expansion.

12. See early sociological work on naval ships in Berkman (1946), which characterised ship life in the terms of a total institutional atmosphere of formal and informal relationships.

13. The was the case in the dramatic presentation of relationships between male naval personnel in a Second World War battlespace in the film version of Nicholas Monsarratt’s 1951 novel The Cruel Sea. The film portrays the conditions in which the Battle of the Atlantic was fought between the Royal Navy and Germany’s submarine U Boats. It is seen from the viewpoint of the British naval officers and seamen who served in convoy escorts. From this idealised perspective, dedicated leadership and strong personal bonds are presented as essential prerequisites to a successful military campaign.

14. Sometimes, the ship’s captain deliberately puts the ship out of its way to get into phone signal range. This will then be communicated throughout the ship, allowing everyone to make their way to the upper deck to be able to pick up a phone signal.
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