

Diary of a Plastic Soldier (extracts)

Pip Thornton

A chain gang unravels, stooping under foreign blades and the shackled safety of surrender. Blind eyes stumble through the heat, while sunburnt soldiers prod and shove, and shout at ears already full of conflict.

This desert is empty with smoke. Marlboro, Bensons or No.1s – take your pick. All dependent, of course, on the source – the Battery clerk with less clerking here to be done, in mud-dust heaven, than sitting, scratching, attaching paperclips to slips of paper, later to be dancing drunk among the gathered dregs of a Rhineland sweat-pot.

Strike a pose, Tommy, strike a pose atop your truck, with its defaced desert rat and Rangers in the windscreen dust. Show Glasgow how it's done. Their son will do them proud and prove his worth in this – this tactless task, this faceless farce we played in.

A promise, a pact, a friend for life (for now), it seems, at least. With the fresh-faced thrill of a first-blood war, he took his shots from over my shoulder.

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Diary of a Plastic Soldier (commentary)

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Diary of a Plastic Soldier is an extract from the poetry and prose I wrote in the years following my deployment to Iraq in 2003. I have previously used poetry to explore my own sensory, affective and embodied experiences of the battlefield¹, but with this piece I included my perceptions of various other bodies I encountered along the way. These memories of other people were perhaps made more acute and more precious not only because of the extreme and relatively brief circumstances of meeting, but perhaps because I was a reservist (TA) soldier, drafted into the regular army as an individual replacement, rather than being a part of a deployment from my parent unit, and did not know the people I served with before I was called up.

The battery clerk in this piece is the character who in my poem *Light Discipline* had to show me how to use an anti-tank missile by touch on our first nighttime guard duty. Because of the strict rules around the use of light and torches during blackouts, it was several days before I recognized him in daylight. The opening of the extract describes watching an American Black Hawk helicopter disgorge its cargo of Iraqi captives destined for the Prisoner of War camp at Um Qasr. Tied together, squinting in the glare of daylight, and with foam buds in their ears, I thus imagined how their experiences might be mediated through their own sensory overloads and deprivations – by circumstance so very different from my own. We were not allowed to take photographs of POWs, but some – like 'Tommy' – did.

¹ Thornton, P. (2015). The meaning of light: seeing and being on the battlefield. *Cultural Geographies*, 22(4), 567-583.

What I discovered when compiling these verses, is that it is perhaps impossible to separate my own embodied experience from that of those I was observing, or at least my perceptions of what they were experiencing. Without the stability of established friendships or shared history, some of the unfamiliar characters and actors I encountered became not only reflections of my own isolated and insecure position, but also extensions through which I was beginning to explore the wider political context of the situations I experienced. When I examine some of my writing closely, it certainly seems that my memories of others are at times vehicles for my own expression; less prosaically or factually accurate, but perhaps providing insights by means of a very much situated, subjective and poetic method.

Biographical Note

Pip Thornton is a PhD candidate in Geopolitics and Cybersecurity at the Centre for Doctoral Training in Cybersecurity, Royal Holloway, University of London. With a professional background in the police and the military, and an academic background in English Literature, her research interests range from military geographies to the agency of search algorithms. Her thesis topic – provisionally entitled *Language in the Age of Algorithmic Reproduction* – examines how words move through digital spaces. Email: pip.thornton.2013@live.rhul.ac.uk