

“You Bring It, We’ll Bring It Out”

Becoming a Soldier in the New Zealand Army

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

in

Social Anthropology

at Massey University

Manawatū, New Zealand.

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2016

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Abstract

The transition from civilian to soldier is a process of identity acquisition. Based on participant-observation, this thesis follows a cohort of new soldiers through the first year and a half of their careers in the New Zealand Army, from their first day of Basic Training to their first overseas deployment. Both the Army as an institution and its individual soldiers are explicitly self-reflexive, and I use not only academic theory but also soldiers' own theories of identity and identity acquisition to make sense of the experience of becoming a soldier. I show that although recruits undergo change in becoming soldiers, they simultaneously retain pre-service identities. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, I argue that civilians join the Army because of a shared "primary habitus", a pre-existing identification with action, productivity and continual self-improvement through facing challenges that forms recruits' earliest embodied understandings of themselves. The relationship between this "practical" habitus and the new soldier habitus to be acquired is key to understanding the civilian-soldier transition. While civilians draw on and thus fulfil the primary practical habitus in becoming soldiers during initial training periods, once socialised they find the Army much less challenging, and therefore may find that their need to be involved in meaningful action is not met. Although the practical habitus is behind and can make sense of the cohort's actions, it is a mode of identity that has not often been recognised as such by academics, due to the fact that they do not share it. However, I show that it is more important in generating soldiers' practice than the modes of identity that are usually employed to understand them: gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality. Therefore, I argue that anthropologists should not limit analysis to traditional axes of identity.

Acknowledgements

So many people did so much to make this research possible.

First and foremost, I could not possibly thank the recruits/trainees/soldiers enough for the months I spent with you, both for being so nice to me but also for pulling me up on my flaws and giving me crap, which is the true Army experience. I wish I could thank research participants individually, but in order to protect your identities, I can only say: you know who you are.

There was no real precedent for embedding an anthropologist long-term amongst a cohort of soldiers across multiple units, and I would like to express my immense gratitude to all of the staff who made it happen.

To the many Section Commanders, 2ICs and Platoon Sergeants who were the ones who had to deal with me on a daily basis; thank you for coordinating my movements, inviting me along with your sections, and to the many of you who went out of your way to check on my welfare. Several Sar Majors come into this category also.

To the Platoon Commanders, OCs, and COs; thank you for allowing me into your units. Several stages of this research would have never gotten off the ground or would have come to abrupt halts if not for the support shown by unit commanders.

I also must thank the Burnham mess aunties, who during Corps Training were the only women I saw for days at a time, and who always asked me how I was.

This research only exists because of Major Josh Wineera, who was its champion and the major driving force behind it from the very beginning to the very end. "Thank you" can't begin to cover it.

I would also like to thank the rest of the working group who figured out what an anthropological project in the Army would look like and how it could work, the staff who facilitated my being embedded with Op Rata II, those who coordinated the periodic updates I gave in Wellington, and those who worked on the review and clearance process.

Academia moves much more slowly than the Army, and over the course of researching and then writing this PhD I went through four Chiefs of Army. I would like to thank every one of them for the support they have shown this research. Then Major General Rhys Jones signed off on the research initially, Lieutenant General Tim Keating was one of this research's biggest supporters as Chief of Army, Vice Chief of Defence Force *and* Chief of Defence Force, Major General Dave Gawn was extremely supportive as Chief of Army, and as Commander Joint Forces New Zealand signed off on the deployment stage. Thanks also to Major General Peter Kelly, and to Brigadier Chris Parsons, Deputy Chief of Army, who gave me the clearance to publish this thesis.

And at Massey, my supervisors: Assoc. Prof. Jeff Sluka, Dr. Bethan Greener, and especially Dr. Carolyn Morris, who went way above and beyond in multiple ways, from letting me crash at her place between Army bases, to always forcing me to get fresh air.

Thank you to Massey University for the Vice-Chancellor's Doctoral Scholarship that funded this research.

Also, of course!: Mum, Grandy, Hannah, Gran, Elaine, Ivy, Lei, Frances.

For the boys



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This thesis is longer than is standard for a Massey University PhD thesis, for the following reasons. During Nina's fieldwork she was offered the opportunity to deploy to the Solomon Islands on a RAMSI mission, and thus was able to follow some of her participants from their first day in the army through to their first deployment. Taking up this unique opportunity meant that fieldwork was longer than usual, which resulted in an extra ethnographic chapter and an extra contextual chapter.

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