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Working with Uncertainty: The Soldier's Nightmare

Artist Residency at Tidworth Garrison

Steve Pratt

Acknowledgement

This article accompanies the video piece depicting members of the Royal Tank Regiment participating in a workshop I ran in September 2016. I wish to acknowledge the tragic incident involving another one of the tank crews from the regiment in June 2017 during a live firing exercise at Castlemartin firing range in Pembrokeshire, South West Wales. Two men died and another two were seriously injured following a blast inside their Challenger 2 tank while using 120mm practice ammunition

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/15/soldier-dies-after-incident-at-tank-firing-range-in-pembrokeshire>

Abstract

As part of a community arts project I was invited by the Young gallery, Salisbury to undertake an artist residency with The Royal Tank Regiment at Tidworth Garrison. This article looks at some of the issues that arose in running a non-directive art workshop with a tank crew, such as soldiers need for certainty of knowing what to do, and being a veteran myself.

Keywords: Artist residency, Community arts, Art Psychotherapy, Veterans, The Army.

Introduction

On 15th September 1916 the first tank crews belonging to two companies of Mk1 Tanks (later re-formed into The Royal Tank Regiment) realized action and led the breakthrough on the Western Front of WW1. This innovation and action by the first Battle Tanks ended the bloody deadlock of trench warfare, thus changing land-based warfare in the process.

Exactly 100 years later, in September 2016, and unrelated to the many WW1 Centenary events, I was invited by the Young Gallery in Salisbury, Wiltshire, to work with the modern day descendants of that same unit as part of a seven-day artist residency in Tidworth Garrison, on the edge of Salisbury Plain. The residency was the culmination of a five-year community arts project focussing on the landscape of Salisbury Plain; funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, to bring together disparate communities residing in the area such as Young Carers, Artists, and two resident units of the Army, through regular art workshops before exhibiting at a joint exhibition in the Young Gallery. A key challenge and learning point for the project was the conflicting demands on soldiers' time, which occasionally restricted their participation in the project. Operational duties had to take precedent, and this sometimes led to last minute changes to the structure of the project programme.

Our residency, organised with only one week's notice, involved a 'creative workshop' with members of The Royal Tank Regiment and was documented through the short video film 'Big Stone and Rain – part two' produced by Mark Edmonson, which is presented in this issue of ATOL. The title of the film comes from the John Piper watercolour landscape painting 'Maen Bras' (Big Stone and Rain, 1943) owned by the Young Gallery, which formed a focus and point of reflection for the project (see Fig. 1). Part one involved work with the other resident regiment.



Fig. 1 'Maen Bras' (Big Stone and Rain): watercolour, John Piper, 1943

Tidworth Garrison

Involvement of the Army had to be sanctioned at the highest level of command at Army headquarters in Andover, Hampshire. Their official line was linked to public relations at a time when the Army was said to be undergoing a period of rapid change (Mallinson 2016) with their statement 'It enabled conversations to take place in the community'. There were restrictions such as 'we don't want any of that trauma stuff' and 'be careful what you film - no weaponry on the tank' but otherwise we had free reign to wander around the camp and engage with what we saw or heard.

For me, it was a curious combination of nostalgia and dread, having landed up in Tidworth Garrison exactly 50 years previously on my first posting after 'graduating' from the Army Junior Leaders College in Dover, Kent. Boy soldiers, as we were then known, were treated harshly by our peers for having the temerity to join so young (I was fourteen years and six months when my

mother took me out of education and into the Army to sign up for 9 years with the Colours and 3 with the Reserve) and the added pretensions of 'leadership' only made matters worse – I was handed a broom and told to keep the Engineer workshops clean. I remember getting into a lot of trouble because I was not good at following the army way of doing things. Eventually, I found a way out by volunteering myself into even deeper trouble – with the SAS (Special Air Service).

In those days, Tidworth Garrison was an austere, dark and foreboding, fun-less place, with drab brick barrack blocks housing hundreds of men set around tarmac drill squares. There was even a military hospital - a reminder of the days before the NHS took responsibility for Military health. At the back of the camp, tank tracks led up onto Salisbury Plain training area.

Fifty years on, the camp has been almost entirely re-built with soft landscaped walkways, single occupancy flats and new housing for the returning troops from Germany following the end of the Cold War. Tidworth is described today as a 'Super Garrison' – soldiers gaze at mobile phones in dining halls called 'Hubs' and when I mention this observation to a senior NCO (non-commissioned officer) he said: "yes, it's a lot more relaxed nowadays".

The creative workshop was (for us) to be the highlight of the residency, where I would use an undirected approach with a group of soldiers who volunteered to produce "something for exhibition" and for Mark it was an opportunity to document the proceedings. There was a curious but not unexpected ambivalence by the officers and senior NCO's in the Squadron office that our proposal had been accepted by Army command in Andover. The Squadron commander delegated responsibility to his second in command, who provided access and 'volunteers'.

The Workshop

The workshop took place in the Squadron training room, a space for teaching tactics and the recognition of foreign military hardware - not an art room. My plan was to work in the way I work with Veterans as an art psychotherapist: to

describe the boundaries of the session in terms of space, time and structure but not to direct what we do. I hoped to work with the uncertainty of not knowing what to do and witness what happens. I arrived early and laid out an array of materials on the floor and placed the chairs around in a circle so that we looked in at the materials.

Six 'volunteers' arrived in a tight bunch, talking and laughing loudly about the prospect of what might lie ahead. The senior corporal was the most vocal in expressing his non-understanding of what they were coming to and what they were supposed to do.

Former Service Personnel (i.e. Veterans) can usually process the uncertainty of not being directed, as a post military issue to be confronted and thought about differently. But I underestimated how difficult it would be for *serving* personnel to let go of their training and take up my invitation to use or experiment with art materials. They were a uniformed unit of trained soldiers working in the enclosed proximity of a Main Battle Tank. I introduced myself as a former SAS soldier who now works with Veterans in the community and in prison. The senior corporal asked how long had I served and where? It was as if they wanted to communicate with the soldier part of me not the art therapist. I said I was in for 17 years, had served in Northern Ireland and the Middle East. In the telling of this I felt a sense of failure, as if I was no longer able to function as a soldier in the way they expected of me.

I told them about their place in the community aspect of the project, and of making art for an exhibition to be shown in the Young Gallery. I passed round my sketch books, in the hope that it might give them ideas, but the random and meaningless nature of those works only added to their confusion. I repeated the invitation to engage with the materials, and tried to explain why this might be difficult, because of the lack of orders and uncertainty around what to do. One soldier, clearly a bright young man who was nodding as I spoke and who later told me he worked at Sainsbury's stacking shelves before joining up "to be a tank driver", set about drawing a tank from memory to much acclaim by the Senior Corporal. I introduced a large canvas

expecting them to be able to engage creatively with the materials. One of the soldiers, a tank driver probably used to taking control, took the initiative of fashioning a Union Jack with acrylic paint using a decorators paint scraper because there were no brushes.



Fig. 2 The finished painting: Untitled, Mixed media on canvas, 140cms x 120cms

I had mistakenly assumed the absence of brushes might have given scope for innovation. In order to keep the momentum going I decided to participate in the painting using a card to spread acrylic paint and fill blank spaces around the canvas. I applied paint directly from the tubes and used my hands to smear the paint. I assumed my actions would present a kind of fearless leadership and bring them alongside, but I soon realised that I was on my own. In my traumatic memory and in my imagination, I was like the 'crazy one' – running into enemy fire with them taking cover, shaking their heads in disbelief. Not unlike an event I had witnessed as a soldier, although in that instance the soldier fell instantly to his death; shot in the head. It was a fine line between the pending catastrophe of making art for myself and complementing or working around the few actions of others on the canvas; acted out within the mocking banter of the group. At one stage a soldier places a boot print onto the canvas as if to provide some certainty about the identity of the thing being made – to claim the ground. It's as if the canvas itself becomes the site of conflict (Rosenberg 1952), between uncertainty and poor leadership, whilst in the background a short history of the Regiment is being relayed calmly by a Senior NCO.

The next day the Squadron were due to drive out onto the Plain for their weekly operational maintenance schedule. We agreed for a couple of the tanks to carefully run over one of the canvasses to create an image/object for the exhibition (see fig. 3). In 2008 I had done the same thing using a Russian T54 tank on the Russian/Finnish border. I remember saying to the Finnish driver "I can't imagine the British Army allowing us to make art using a main Battle Tank", but here we were 8 years later. This part of the art making seemed to go well, with all of us in control of our own particular areas of expertise. The orders to drive over the art materials were specific and deliverable. The tank was driven carefully to cut through, crush and re-shape the canvas stretcher – I thought of it as a kind of controlled violence arriving, perhaps, at some conflict resolution through the rebuilding of new perspectives.



Fig. 3 The Finished Artwork: Untitled, Challenger Mk2 Battle Tank marks on Canvas, 140cms x 120cms

Discussion

Soldiers always need to know what happens next. The whole basis of soldiering is formed around a set of rules known as Standing Operating Procedures (SOP's) where all operational eventualities are written down and learned in pamphlets known as SOP's. Independent thinking is not a requirement. SOP's creates a conditioned form of certainty of knowing what

to do, even when events do not go as planned. Preparing for operations requires endless planning for when actions go wrong, to plan for the unexpected, always thinking 'what if?' These are known as 'Actions On', and a commander is judged by the men on his ability to provide certainty in all areas, by planning for every eventuality and relaying them orally to the soldiers under his command.

Towards the end of my military service (1964 – 1981) I found it increasingly difficult to make a decision because of the dread that all decisions carried the potential for catastrophe and annihilation. Thus begins the opening scenario for PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder). I clearly remember the Art Therapy Large Group, when I was training as an art therapist at Goldsmiths, being the last bastion of fearful thinking in this context of uncertainty. Being forced back on myself and my history, to re-experience the dread of having no leader, no plan, no orders. It was such a good lesson.

Working with serving soldiers in the workshop brought it all home. I, myself, as the art therapist, was like a very poor and potentially dangerous commander - unable to give orders to the men. Yet despite the apparent total incompatibility between the rigours of military service and the free practice of art, I believe it is possible to find *in the act of doing the art-making* a space for new narratives to take shape. The very real difficulty of uncertainty for Veterans is the first thing that has to be confronted in the therapeutic setting because it is that very uncertainty which often leads to the fears and behaviours that lead to difficulties in their post-service lives.

Biography

Steve Pratt is a former SAS soldier (1969-1981). He graduated from the University of Leeds in Fine Art with First Class honours in 1992. He completed his MA Art Psychotherapy (Goldsmiths) in 2013 and Understanding & Working with Trauma at the Tavistock Centre the following year. He works as an artist and art psychotherapist from his art studio in south London. His performance 'About the Making of a Dangerous Individual' provides the introduction for lectures and interventions on the subject of art

and trauma at various institutions. He provides art therapy for the London Veterans Service (LVS) In-reach team to Veterans in prison.

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