

The Body and Becoming a soldier in Britain during the Second World War

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In February 1942, twenty year-old Alan Badman was recruited into the ranks of the Royal Engineers. Having passed a medical examination, Alan completed three months of training at Chatham Barracks in Kent. Sixty years later, in an interview for the Imperial War Museum, he reflected on his early experiences of military life:

[Barracks] were like a prison regime really. Fighting to get up in the morning to see if you could get to the toilet. You had no excuses. You had to bark to orders. There was no you can't do this or you can't do that, blame anybody else. If you can't get it, you fight somebody else for it... In the end you start to enjoy it. You start to get a bit of pride cos they'd say you were a shower of shit. All day long, you've done this wrong and you've done that wrong. Then they say 'oh look'. It's like you can be indoctrinated to the stage where you were rebelling against it one minute then taking pride in it the next.¹

Alan was one of over three-and-a-half million men who joined the British Army between 1939 and 1945.² The majority of these men were conscripts, enlisted under the government's National Service Acts, which imposed liability for military service on all males aged eighteen-to forty-one (and later forty-five).³ Historians have examined the ways that the military authorities adapted doctrine and organization to meet the needs of this new civilian intake, including changes in selection, leadership, and education.⁴ However, the experiences of the recruits themselves remain relatively unexplored.⁵

This chapter complements the others in this volume by looking closely at an underappreciated but essential aspect of raising manpower for a mass army: the processes used to transform raw civilians into disciplined, fit, battle-ready soldiers. It examines the transition from civilian to soldier during basic army training in the Second World War. It does so by focusing on the recruit's body. Various theorists have drawn attention to the formal organizational control of soldiers' bodies within military institutions, and connections between the male military body and hegemonic masculinity.⁶ Yet, this work has rarely been grounded in the bodily practices of service personnel.⁷ Scholarly studies of the Second World War have examined the contribution of military medicine to manpower efficiency in overseas theatres, as well as the treatment and rehabilitation of wounded and disabled servicemen in hospitals back in Britain.⁸ We know much less, however, about the ways that men were physically prepared for war.

This chapter explores the methods used by army training officers and instructors to mould, treat, and transform the civilian bodies that they were presented with. It examines the qualities considered ideal, the skills taught, and the strategies used to inculcate military values, including close regulation of diet, dress, sexual activity, and exercise. To do so, this chapter draws largely on the instructional material produced for army training staff between 1939 and 1945. The first codified set of guidelines was published in 1908 as the *Manual of Physical Training*, largely in response to concerns about the poor physical condition of recruits during the South African War. There were several revisions to physical training doctrine before and during the Second World War, much of them reflecting military requirements and wider ideas about health, all of which will be examined in this chapter.⁹

Importantly, this chapter is also rooted directly in the experiences of army recruits - men like Alan Badman, whose story reveals a great deal about what it was like to become a British soldier during the Second World War. He explains that he had to get up at a certain

time, go to the toilet at a certain time, and obey orders all day long. Alan was no longer able to employ or to rest his body as he saw fit. Indeed, he compares this regime to a prison sentence. Yet Alan ultimately recounts his transformation as a success, stating that, in the end, he took pride in being able to keep up with the army's demands. This raises questions about the extent to which Alan was able to exercise agency, or had internalized military control. To explore these issues, this chapter utilizes a range of personal narratives, including diaries, memoirs, responses from Mass Observation (a British program that used volunteers to record their everyday life experiences), and a selection of oral history testimonies from in the Imperial War Museum sound archive.¹⁰ All of the accounts included come from men recruited into the rank and file of the army. Like the majority of servicemen in this period, all were aged between eighteen and thirty at the time of enlistment.¹¹ All went on to serve in combat operations overseas. While these sources are subject to all of the caveats that surround the use of personal testimonies, they are nonetheless highly revealing.¹² They provide glimpses into the daily experience of routines and treatments as told by men at the receiving end of army discipline. They reveal the extent to which recruits complied with the demands of their instructors, their reasons for engaging in behaviors deemed to be unhealthy or unsafe, and the meanings they attributed to their own bodies. Analyzing the feelings, expectations, and motivations of recruits in this way opens up a number of themes, including control, agency and resistance, gender and class identities, and emotional responses to military service.

"Then you're under control": Settling in

For the majority of army recruits during the Second World War, training lasted for about four months. At the start of the war, men were enlisted directly into regiments and received basic training in depots. However, officers soon discovered that recruits were being allocated to roles that did not best suit their abilities. So, in July 1942, the army introduced the

General Service Scheme. From then on, recruits spent their first six weeks in Primary Training Centres, where they underwent basic infantry training, as well as aptitude and intelligence tests. They were then posted to Corps Training Centres to receive instruction specific to their arm of the service. This ranged from sixteen weeks for infantrymen to thirty-two weeks for signallers.¹³ Whatever his eventual destination, every new recruit began basic training by undergoing the same rituals and practices, all of which were designed to strip away his civilian identity and submit him to the authority of his officers and instructors. Upon arrival at the camps, men were given an army number, a uniform, and a regulation haircut, and assigned a space to sleep. Albert Hunter volunteered for the Rifles just before the outbreak of war in 1939. Describing his initiation at Winchester Barracks, he stated, “They take all your clothes off you. They give you a bunch of canvas clothes called fatigues, and issue you with a knife, fork, spoon, razor, comb and lava brush in a holdall, a bed in a barracks, and then you’re under control.”¹⁴

The issue of military clothing, in particular, elicited a range of emotional responses. An anonymous Mass Observation respondent wrote in his diary on his second day at Queen’s Barracks in Perth in 1942, “we were dressed in our denims (work suit) and I for one felt even more depressed. We sent all our clothes home and now the complete break from civilian life was accentuated.”¹⁵ Miner’s son, James Wyndham, on the other hand, was enthusiastic about his uniform because it meant that he was better clothed than he had been before. James, from Abergavenny, had struggled to find work since leaving school at sixteen. He described training at Bedford Barracks as “heaven” because “I had two pairs of navy boots, two pairs of underwear, which I’d never had before. I had an overcoat, the first overcoat in my life, and woollen vests.”¹⁶ For others, the uniform had more symbolic value. In November 1940, recruit Henry Novy recorded in his diary at a Leeds depot that “the pride taken in the uniform is that of being part of a well-organized and efficient machine.”¹⁷ At a time when inclusion in the

armed forces signified increased masculine status, new soldiers also enjoyed looking different to their civilian counterparts.¹⁸ Peter Holyhead was called-up for military service in 1943. As one of thirteen siblings, including eight brothers, he welcomed the extra attention from his father, who “when I went home in uniform, tended to make more of a fuss of me than he did the other boys.”¹⁹ Twenty year-old Leslie Gray trained with the Gloucestershire Regiment in 1940. He also recalled that his father, a First World War veteran, “Never took any notice of me because the Victorian parents didn’t and me being the last, he didn’t take any notice whatsoever, not when I was a child. But when I went in the army he wanted to show me off, cos he was an old soldier. He’d take me down the pub in full uniform, because you couldn’t be in civilian clothes in those days.”²⁰

From day one, recruits were expected to be neat and tidy in their appearance and to maintain good personal hygiene. In September 1940, an army training memoranda emphasized the importance of good grooming habits to the acquisition of a soldierly mind-set by stating: “A dirty soldier is invariably a bad soldier, slovenly in action and in thought; whereas the alert, clean man reflects his characteristics in his turn out.”²¹ Army regulations included shaving daily, a practice with which many young recruits had little experience. Sixteen year-old John Dray lied about his age to enlist in 1944. On his first day at Britannia Barracks in Norwich, the sergeant-major asked “shave boy?” When John replied “No sir I don’t shave.” The sergeant-major said “You do now, boy.”²² William Dilworth was eighteen when he was called-up and sent for basic training with the Rifles in York in 1942. When asked by his sergeant-major how often he shaved, William replied that he had never shaved before because he had no facial hair. This was his first lesson in army discipline:

He called one of the corporals and he said, “take this man to the ablutions and see that he shaves immediately.” So the corporal marched me off across the square to the toilets and he said, “Well, shave,” and I said, “I’ve never shaved.” So he says, “Get your razor

out,” so I got the razor, which the army gave me and opened it up and I said, “Well, I haven’t got a razor blade,” so he says, “Put it all back together again and go through the motions, soap your face and then make out you’re shaving.” So, without a razor blade in I went through the motions of shaving and everything, washed my face and was marched back to the parade ground, marched up to the sergeant-major and the sergeant-major looked at my face and said, “That’s bloody better, man. Now in future you’ll shave every morning”.²³

Early on, the army also sought to establish control over the body’s inner functioning. The 1941 manual *Physical and Recreational Training* recommended “the systematic development and strengthening of the whole body”, based on “physiological principles.” These included “good nutrition,” and “careful regulation of smoking and drinking.”²⁴ By 1944, a replacement publication, *Basic Battle and Physical Training*, dedicated an entire chapter to “Body mechanics and applied physiology.” Comparing the human body to a combustion engine, it stated that “The petrol must be ample, and a free air entry assured, together with accurate timing of ignition and efficient clearing of the exhaust.”²⁵ Thus, the recruit was fed, rested, and cleansed of his bodily waste products. Against a backdrop of wider advances in physiology and growing professional interest in nutrition, feeding the soldier became something of a science during the Second World War.²⁶ At the start of hostilities, the army established twenty-four cookery schools where civilian experts in dietetics trained army cooks in both nutrition and variety.²⁷ As a result, recruits in training received four meals per day, made up of meat, fish, vegetables, pulses, and cereals. These included “body-building proteins, energy-producing carbohydrates and fats, and protective vitamins and salts.” Rest, defined as “all degrees of absence from work, from sleep in the lying position to relaxation in the upright” was considered equally important to allow the body time to absorb food and encourage the

removal of products “for disposal and excretion through lung, bladder and skin.” Official advice stipulated that men secure eight hours sleep per night along with sufficient rest periods throughout the day. Specifically, each meal was to be followed by half an hour of relaxation time to “help the digestive processes get underway.”²⁸

Soldiers’ responses to the army diet appear to have been framed largely by social class. While men tended to describe the same sorts of meals being served, differences in satisfaction depended on what they had been used to be before joining the service. Miner’s son James Wyndam recalled that there was “good grub. I’d never really had seconds. We had liver and bacon and gravy for the first meal.”²⁹ Nineteen year-old David Evans was also from a Welsh mining family. Enlisted into the infantry in 1940, he later recalled in his memoir that “I hadn’t been accustomed to anything better and was, at least, being well-fed, with solid and regular meals, for their first time in my life.”³⁰ Robert Ellison had been raised in difficult circumstances by a single mother after his father’s death in a colliery in the North East of England. Robert described the food at a primary training centre in Cheshire as “pretty good... You ate things there you’d never eaten before. Like I remember the first time in my life that we had peas that had not been taken out of the pod...I thought my goodness pea pods for your lunch [laughs].”³¹

There was, however, a general feeling among recruits from all backgrounds that the army diet was sufficient, especially in-light of wider food shortages. Twenty-one year-old former grammar school boy Walter Chalmers volunteered with the 1st Battalion, Liverpool Scottish and recalled that “the food was very much better than one would be getting in civilian life at that time.”³² Roy Bolton, another grammar school graduate and former county council clerk from London, trained at Richmond Barracks in York in 1943. Although he “took to the food as best I could” and “didn’t always like it”, Roy was still surprised by the complaints that came from the men in his barracks. He stated that “it was as though they’d been brought up to dine at the Ritz or somewhere...I used to wonder what on earth they were accustomed to at

home.”³³ Even men who had been used to eating more noticed the benefits of developing new habits. John Gray explained that “I found at first that I used to be hungry after meals but there was no more so you couldn’t have it.” With time, however, John felt that he “certainly became much fitter. Even I realised that. So although the food didn’t appear to be as much, it did me a damned sight better.”³⁴ John Dray likewise recalled that at Britannia Barracks the food “did take a bit of getting used to” because:

The quantity wasn’t terribly great but the army convinced us boys that if we overfed that we’d be fat and hungry and no good. To keep us hungry is the way to build life. In the diet we had, we used to have lectures on this by the MO, that the dieticians had worked out all the vitamins and so forth we needed to grow to be big strong men so we accepted it.³⁵

It appears, then, that over time recruits came to trust in the expertise of army staff and they accepted changes to their diets, particularly when they experienced positive physical effects.

”He wouldn’t be scruffy for long”: Monitoring and surveillance

Having set out what was expected of recruits regarding their appearance, personal hygiene, diet, and digestion, the authorities used a range of methods to monitor men’s adherence to standards. Kit inspections and parades were a routine feature of life in barracks, designed to ensure that men prepared their uniforms in strict accordance with army regulations. James Wyndham described how he put soap in his trousers and slept on them the night before, because “when I got up they were as if I’d ironed them.” He also recalled that any recruit who was “slovenly” and “unclean” was taken by the lance corporals to the ablutions and “scrubbed viciously with a scrubbing brush”. The effect was that “he wouldn’t be scruffy for long.”³⁶

From the outset of training, men were also subject to regular physical examinations so that medical staff could identify and fix any problems. On his first day at Retford Barracks,

William Dilworth had “a thorough examination, your ears and every other part of your body.” This included a dental examination during which he had a tooth “drilled and filled.”³⁷ Particularly prominent in soldiers’ accounts are the army’s “short arm” inspections that were used to detect venereal disease. These most intimate of assessments were often performed en-masse, with medical officers paying little attention to matters of confidentiality. James Wyndham remembered “a big house where the doctor was. You were assembled there to drop your trousers and have a medical FFI [Free From Infection].”³⁸ Recalling one particularly embarrassing experience with a female medic at an infantry camp on Salisbury Plain in 1939, Bert Scrivens described what happened to one unfortunate man in his unit:

It was quite funny because the RSM [Regimental Sergeant-Major] was standing there and he said “Right it’s a lady doctor, behave yourselves. Any man who doesn’t goes out of here at the double.” One bloke, well her method of doing the inspection, she had a long something like a pencil and lifted the penis up and put it down again. One bloke got aroused and the Sergeant-Major said “that man, out”, and as soon as he got outside the marquee he got a bucket of cold water over him, clothed and all.³⁹

Medical examination was therefore something of a spectacle in which men were expected to submit to the demands of the medical inspector. Those who did not obey, even unwillingly, were publically shamed, as a deterrent and a warning to other men.

Recruits also experienced considerable restraints on their personal movements, especially during the early stages of training. Men were usually confined to barracks for the first six weeks to let discipline take hold. Roy Bolton recalled that “very early it was made clear to us at the barracks that there was no way we’d be allowed to go out and show ourselves in public until we knew how to behave as proper soldiers.”⁴⁰ Leslie Gray likewise recalled “we didn’t get out until about eight weeks. You had to be a fairly trained person before they’d let you through the gates. I think they thought you’d not come back again.”⁴¹ Within barracks,

surveillance was enhanced through a timetable, which scheduled every moment of the soldier's day. Even the most natural bodily functions were regulated by time. James Wyndham recalled one incident at Bedford Barracks in January 1940:

You had to be regular in your motions as well. You had to be up with the lark, get your breakfast, come back you've got to have done your crap and you've got to be ready. If you were caught short in the middle of the morning. I've known chaps to say to Corporal Sears, "Corporal, I've got to go to the loo." "You bloody well won't." Then suddenly [makes noise of someone defecating]. He's got the shits and you've got him doubled-up around the barrack square. Oh I've seen that, terrible. You know, the man couldn't help it because he probably had one or two pints the night before or ate something that didn't agree with him. But I've seen Corporal Sears ruthless. He wouldn't let the man fall-out, even when he had diahorrea.⁴²

Confining men to barracks also allowed army superiors to monitor sexual behavior - again important for controlling venereal disease. The frustrations that men felt are clear in their testimonies. Sherwood Forrester's recruit Neville Wildgust recalled that "for the first sixteen weeks we were hard and fast locked in and there was no sex life at all."⁴³ A Mass Observation respondent named Leonard England noted in his 1941 diary that the men in his unit had to find "sexual release" by describing "moments of passion" and reading love letters to each other.⁴⁴ Such accounts can be read as displays of masculinity, based on virility and heterosexuality, leading men to engage in competition with each other. Indeed, some recruits believed that bromide had been added to their tea to, as one man claimed, "keep your sexual fantasies down."⁴⁵ This was a widespread myth within the armed forces that reinforced traditional notions of masculinity, based on the assumption that only chemicals could cause a reduced sex drive.⁴⁶ The reality was that men's libidos were probably affected by the change of lifestyle.

While it is unlikely that the army chemically tempered men's impulses, welfare officers did try to encourage abstinence by providing healthy recreations like libraries, games rooms, and supervised all-ranks dances. William Dilworth remembered that at Retford Barracks:

We would have a dance I think it was every Saturday night in the barracks and women who wanted to come to the barracks, there'd be army lorries sent into the town and all those that wanted to come, they just piled in and when the lorry was full they would bring them to the camp, you know. But then the dance would finish at ten o'clock and all the women had to get back on the lorries and taken back to town and they were all checked and everything to make sure nobody was staying behind.⁴⁷

Such wholesome recreations were not, however, enough to deter amorous recruits, like men stationed close to Auxiliary Territorial Service [ATS] camps. A Mass Observation respondent named Morris was based at an infantry depot in Essex in 1942. He reported that "the men keep their urges fastened on such females as may be in range", especially "the girls in the canteen."⁴⁸ In June 1941, Leonard England likewise proclaimed that "the ATS are far more in demand as girlfriends."⁴⁹

Within barracks, soldiers also had sex with each other. Despite being a crime in both civil and military law, personal accounts reveal that homosexuality was openly practiced in some units.⁵⁰ At Blanford Camp, Private R.H. Lloyd Jones observed two recruits whose "behaviour all day was perfectly proper. It was therefore a little surprising sometimes, when awakening in the morning to see the two of them sharing the same bed."⁵¹ Morris described in detail the evening activities at his barracks in Essex:

It is a quite well-recognised fact that such activities do occur, and that those who participate will freely admit to them. This may be due to the fact that recruits include all types, not omitting those already well versed in these arts... and the outside

opportunities for the “working off” of sex... There are a certain number who are definitely treated as females by the others. They are referred to by feminine pronouns and use feminine first names (Sheila, Nora, Elsie). Some of these men go so far as to “make up” in the evening with eyebrow pencil, rouge and lipstick, and a certain neighbouring public house is supposed to be the favourite haunt in fixing any rendezvous... These men-women often refer avidly to their officer gentlemen friends and a certain few N.C.O.s are popularly supposed to utilise their services.⁵²

Morris therefore acknowledged the influence of the enclosed all-male environment, which could force men to rethink their sexual orientations. However, at a time when thousands of homosexual men were recruited into the armed forces, Morris recognized that recruits could have been acting on pre-existing sexual preferences.⁵³ What is also interesting is that Morris describes these encounters as moments of collusion between the recruits and their superiors. His account suggests that away from the formal training environment, where monitoring and surveillance became more relaxed, officers and men found safe spaces in which to pursue their own agendas.

”Bigger and better”: Physical Transformation

Training was a two-pronged process. While exerting control over recruits’ bodies, army instructors also sought to transform them: to equip them with the capabilities and skills needed for effective soldiering. This began with physical training (PT), a daily forty-five minute session in the gymnasium or outside. Part of army training since the mid-nineteenth century, PT was designed to create a base level of fitness by instilling five main physical attributes.⁵⁴ These were: mobility; strength; endurance; agility, dexterity and speed; and carriage. Men took part in exercises including running, marching, skipping rope, heaving, climbing, vaulting, and games.⁵⁵ All activities were given “reality of purpose” by being associated with command

objectives. For example, in preparation for long periods on the move, recruits were taught about energy efficiency by learning to relax all muscles not required for walking, running, crawling, climbing, lifting and pulling.⁵⁶ In addition to improving fitness, PT was valued for building character and morale.⁵⁷ *Physical and Recreational Training* claimed that PT “gives a man confidence in himself, his performance and his powers of endurance.”⁵⁸ This sentiment was echoed three years later in *Basic and Battle Physical Training*, which advised that PT “is not merely a means of developing the physique, but it also helps to train and influence the mind... Achievement will promote complete self-confidence and lead the soldier, through the conviction of his own fighting efficiency and that of his comrades, to an indomitable will to victory...It will create the fighting spirit.”⁵⁹ By linking physical fitness with moral attributes, army training doctrine in this period reflected traditional notions of military masculinity based on the warrior ideal.⁶⁰

Having mastered basic PT, recruits progressed to battle training, which applied these fundamental physical skills to military activities, including route marches, running, assault courses, climbing and scaling, lifting and carrying, swimming, landing by parachute, close combat, and weapons handling. Exercises were, as far as possible, carried out under realistic war conditions to develop the tactical thinking required for combat. An Army Training Memorandum from September 1940 explained:

In war, amid the general noise and confusion of battle, nerves will be strained, time will be pressing, the situation may be vague, orders may arrive late, and messages may be ambiguous. Officers and men must be trained to expect such conditions and their imaginations must be roused. Deliberate disregard of warlike conditions in training must not be allowed.⁶¹

To develop "night-mindedness," recruits participated in night exercises and patrols lasting up to a week.⁶² By day, they learned to move and conceal their bodies in different environments

and landscapes. Robert Ellison remembered "galloping about fields and woods," and "creeping about the grass...We were given an objective to get to without being seen."⁶³ Roy Bolton similarly recalled learning "how to move, advancing, covering people, who were going in front of you and then moving to catch up with them, throwing yourself down when commanded."⁶⁴ Assault courses taught recruits how to surmount obstacles such as walls, trenches, parapets, and ramps that were likely to be encountered in the field. John Dray remembered "We used to swing across a ditch full of barbed wire and all sorts of horrible junk, on a rope and if you let go they just told you that you were an idiot when you fell among the barbed wire and had to get yourself out."⁶⁵ As a result of repeated practice, however, men would learn to read obstacles ahead of time and maintain momentum. Robert Ellison recalled that "when we did it [an assault course] the first time they said that was it, yes, but it had to be done twice as quick as that and by the end of the week we were doing it very, very quickly." At the same time, instructors, who were "screaming mad" encouraged the men to be aggressive.⁶⁶

For even more realistic training, recruits could be sent to "battle drill" schools where they took part in field exercises in all weathers and conditions. Established from mid-1941 in response to military defeats overseas that were linked to poor morale, battle drill courses aimed to bolster men's resilience by exposing them to the sights and sounds of war. This meant that troops experienced live firing and, in some instances, were taken to abattoirs to witness the sight of blood.⁶⁷ Vic Emery attended a four week course at a battle drill school at Featherstone Park in Northumberland during February 1942. He recalled "we were out all day crawling about, being fired on", while the Regimental Sergeant Major shouted "when you see Germans there's no good calling for your mother."⁶⁸ Kenneth Johnstone trained at the battle drill school at Barnard Castle in Durham in 1942, and described a "great urge to really induce a great deal of toughness. We were carrying buckets of pigs' blood and throwing them over figures of

Germans and instructors were shouting “can you kill a German?” in your ear.”⁶⁹ Training staff clearly sought to affect both physical and psychological changes through bodily channels.

Again, there was a definite feeling among recruits that PT and battle training did inspire confidence, as men experienced higher state of physical fitness than they had attained before enlistment. An anonymous Mass Observation respondent recorded in his diary in August 1940 that “I used to pride myself on my fitness before I entered army life but this daily physical training has developed my stamina tremendously.”⁷⁰ Bert Blackhall, an apprentice mechanic from the East End of London who had left school at fourteen, explained that “I was a street corner boy and this was something new to me, physical jerks, something to tune me up, and I felt tuned-up. I felt good.”⁷¹ County Council Clerk Roy Bolton, who weighed nine stone at his army medical examination and described himself as “all skinny” at enlistment, also remembered “heavy physical exercise all the time. Not just PT but you marched everywhere at the double... Practically everything we did seemed to be of a physical nature, to which I just wasn’t accustomed to.” As a result, Roy “just got bigger and better, which,” as he remembered, “did me a lot of good.”⁷² These accounts suggest that men of all backgrounds experienced positive changes to their bodies as a result of entry into the army, and they felt the effort was worth it for looking and feeling better.

Conversely, some recruits were simply not robust enough to keep up with the army’s demands. PT sergeant Ian Sinclair explained that “It was very hard and made some of them wish they’d never been born. To have to go on a three-hour route march killed them. They were falling out by the wayside.”⁷³ Robert Ellison recalled that “some couldn’t do it. Absolutely fatigued, you know.... There was no way they could get them fit... I don’t know exactly what happened to them.”⁷⁴ One option was for officers to refer men for medical regrading. An investigation by the Directorate of Medical Research at the end of 1942 revealed that as many as fifty men in every 1,000 were being medically downgraded at primary training centres. This

was due to both the physical strain of training as well as differences in judgement between the civilian medical boards who had initially examined men for service and army medical officers. Those who were downgraded were either medically discharged or assigned to non-combatant units, like the Pioneers or Service Corps.⁷⁵

Alternatively, recruits who were considered physically underdeveloped could be sent to an Army Physical Development Centre (PDC). Initially established in response to manpower shortages during the interwar years and revived in 1941, PDCs focused on building up men's bodies with diet and exercise.⁷⁶ Nineteen year-old Ernest Harvey was called up in May 1942. He described himself as "somewhat underdeveloped" as a result of suffering from rheumatic fever as a child. After six weeks of basic training at a Durham depot, Ernest was sent to No. 70 Physical Development Centre in Skegness. For two months he did "nothing else but PT unarmed combat and route marches" to "build muscle power."⁷⁷ Anthony Bashford was transferred from a training battalion at Bovington to No. 30 Physical Development Centre at Kingston-upon-Thames because, as he explained, "the army decided that I was underweight for my height". Anthony spent six weeks "marching in battle order around Richmond Park, running along the tow path, a lot of gymnastics and a lot of track running." Although he felt "slightly miffed" at being identified as underdeveloped, he believed that the course did him a lot of good because "it gave me a physical stamina that I might never have developed for myself."⁷⁸ Both Ernest and Anthony were posted back to their original regiments, where they completed their training. Certainly, the results obtained at PDCs were encouraging, with over eighty per cent of men in early cohorts achieving higher physical standards.⁷⁹

Not all recruits were equally motivated, however, and some purposely tried to avoid physical training activities. In a diary entry for January 1941, Leonard England described "a very strong resentment to P.T., which is held out in the open at 8.30 in vest and shorts. Over 50% I should say attribute their coughs and colds and ailments to it and all sorts of excuses are

used to get out of it."⁸⁰ These men literally used their bodies to resist by malingering. Another strategy was to cheat. Sixteen year-old Percy Bowpitt had lied about his age to enlist in May 1942. He was assigned to the Royal West Kent Regiment in Maidstone, where training soon came as a shock, particularly the weekly cross country run:

Our route took us out of town, through farms and fields and back through the town. This had the advantage that when the edge of town was reached it was possible to hop on a bus...Provided the bus stopped some way from the barracks all was well but often the conductor would deliberately pass the stop we needed and then stop nearer to the barrack where would be standing Regimental Police waiting to catch anyone too slow off the mark.⁸¹

Even eager volunteers, therefore, tried to undermine the army's intentions. Yet as Percy's account tells us, their efforts met with mixed success.

“A proper soldier now”: unit cohesion

While conditioning individual bodies to withstand the rigors of war, PT and battle training also enhanced the unit cohesion required for success in battle.⁸² During PT lessons and field exercises, for example, men were split into groups in order to inculcate "team spirit."⁸³ Competitive games and sports also promoted "esprit de corps", "comradeship" and "an unselfish attitude for the good of the side."⁸⁴ Rooted in the nineteenth-century public school tradition and incorporated into army training during the First World War, regimental sports included boxing, swimming, football, hockey, and rugby.⁸⁵ Collective physical training, such as marching, likewise induced a sense of solidarity as men experienced a feeling of shared hardship. Even reluctant recruit Henry Novy admitted feeling pride when recounting a route march:

This marching was queer – at the beginning I felt for the first time, almost in spite of myself, that pride in numbers, marching numbers, squad after squad in step. I saw it in many men's eyes, looking proudly to the passers-by. They were happy to be carrying full kit and marching, squad after squad, over 400 men. When we had our kits on, two of my mates remarked: "Here we go boys, real soldiers now". The little coalminer said: "You feel a proper soldier now, don't you?" When we came in, tired, all tried to say they loved it and felt no effects. A lad with bad feet dropped out. His mate remarked: "I'd rather be dead than drop out of a route march, I would honest." To my shame I must say I felt the same, a pride of being a soldier, well disciplined, in step, doing hard work.⁸⁶

It was, therefore, when he fell in line with the other men that Henry suddenly experienced the feeling of becoming a soldier. He also describes the march as a rite of passage, with the ability to endure central to acquiring a soldierly identity. Ultimately, Henry seems to have felt helpless to stop the changes that were happening, as he was immersed into the collective body of men.

This was also the chief function of drill, a highly regimented exercise in which men performed exact movements and gestures to an external rhythm imposed by the commands of the drill sergeant. The result was that recruits came "physically to act and perceive themselves on parade as one man."⁸⁷ As such, drill produced the uniform response to orders needed to achieve battlefield objectives. According to *Basic and Battle Physical Training*, the synchronized repetition of movements was designed to "free the conscious brain to concentrate on summing up the actions and intentions of the enemy."⁸⁸ Recruits themselves depict this sensation in their accounts of drill, although in a more sardonic way.

John Gray claimed that "the idea was to teach you that you would do as you were told and you would do it at once...You stopped thinking and you just did as you were told. If they said "stand on your head" you stood on your head. If they said "try flying" you would try

flying."⁸⁹ Ron Gray completed basic training at Bulford Barracks in Wiltshire in 1941. He remembered "You stamp up and down and you march and you halt and you march and you halt and you march, as though it's designed really to crush your brain power [laughs], to turn you into an automaton."⁹⁰ Using similar language, James Wyndham described "weeks and weeks of this sodded square-bashing until eventually you were automatons. You were doing it in your sleep. Suddenly you had a soldierly bearing and suddenly you had a measuredly step and you were a good marcher. Without knowing you were doing it."⁹¹ These testimonies convey a sense of disembodiment, as the men developed instinctive and immediate obedience.

Drill also exposed bodily limitations, as men struggled to perform the complex sequences of movements required. Kenneth New trained with the Hampshire Regiment in Colchester. He recalled that "drill was very awkward. For some unknown reason I didn't know right from left." Roy Bolton also remembered:

I didn't take to it at all well because in those days anyway I was somewhat clumsy I think, in a sort of bodily way. I found the marching and even keeping step, not too difficult keeping step, but not entirely easy, and then the sudden changes in direction, the right turns, the left turns, the about turns, these I did find tricky. Occasionally I distinguished myself by marching off in the wrong direction.⁹²

Again this story can be read as one of failure on the part of Roy's body, which was literally out of step with his fellow recruits. He blamed his non-compliance on his clumsy body. It seems that although he wished to comply with the army's orders, his physiological make-up prevented him from doing so. On the other hand, the fact that Roy recounts this as failure also suggests the success of military discipline because he had internalized control.

Raising soldiers for war between 1939 and 1945 was, therefore, not simply question of 'man-management'.⁹³ The process was undoubtedly physical. Troops in training were told what to wear, when to wash, what to eat, how to exercise, and how to move their bodies as one.

Basic training in the army was indeed a context of extreme militarisation and control. Soldiers' accounts tell us, however, that the body was consistently at the forefront of the experience of barrack life for recruits themselves. The body was a source of enjoyment, pain, embarrassment and constraint. It was a marker of class and masculine identity and it was a site of negotiation and resistance between the soldier and the State.

NOTES

¹ Alan Badman, interview with Imperial War Museum, June 2002, accession 23227, reel 2.

² The National Archives, Kew: WO277/12, Army and A.T.S., 1939–46, appendix C, 80.

³ Ministry of Labour and National Service, *Manpower: The Story of Britain's Mobilisation for War* (London: HMSO, 1944), 11.

⁴ Jeremy Crang, *The British Army and the People's War, 1939-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); David Fraser, *And we Shall Shock them: The British Army in the Second World War* (London: Cassell Military, 1983); David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War Against Germany, 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵ Accounts of military training appear within popular histories of battalions and biographies of individual soldiers. However, there has been no in-depth academic study of the experience of British Army training during the Second World War.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1979); Arthur Frank, "For a sociology of the body: an analytical review," in *The Body: Social Processes and Cultural Theory*, ed. Michel Featherstone, Michael Hepworth and Bryan Turner (London: Sage, 1991), 36-102; David Morgan, "You too can have a body like mine: reflections on the male body and masculinities," in *Body Matters: Essays on the Sociology of the Body*, ed. Sarah Scott and David Morgan (London: Falmer, 1993), 69-88.

⁷ Notable exceptions are: Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion, 1999); Paul Higate, "The body resists: everyday clerking and unmilitary practice," in *The Body in Everyday Life*, ed. S. Nettleton & J. Watson (London: Routledge, 1998), 180-98.

⁸ Mark Harrison, *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine in the Second World War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Julie Anderson, *War, Disability and Rehabilitation in Britain: 'Soul of a Nation'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

⁹ James D. Campbell, *The Army Isn't All Work: Physical Culture and the Evolution of the British Army, 1860-1920* (London: Routledge, 2017), 49.

¹⁰ Mass Observation was a social research project designed to capture the everyday experiences of life in Britain between 1937 and 1948. During the Second World War several "observers" reported on day-to-day life in the armed forces. See Lucy Noakes, *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 75.

¹¹ Great Britain. House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, *Strength and Casualties of the Armed Forces and Auxiliary Services of the United Kingdom, 1939–1945*, Cmd. 6832, 1946, 2.

¹² See for example, Sidone Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 37; Nigel de Lee, "Oral history and British soldiers' experience," in *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West*, ed. Paul Addison and Angus Calder (London: Pimlico, 1997), 365.

¹³ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 68.

¹⁴ Albert Edward Hunter, interview with Imperial War Museum, 1994, accession 34732, reel 1.

¹⁵ Mass Observation Archive (hereafter MOA) D 5134, Diary for December 1942, 2.

¹⁶ James Wyndham, interview with Imperial War Museum, October 2000, accession 20793, reel 4.

¹⁷ MOA D 5165, Diary for November 1940.

¹⁸ See Sonya .O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 179.

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- ¹⁹ Peter Holyhead, interview with Imperial War Museum, November 2000, accession 2099, reel 1.
- ²⁰ Leslie Gray, interview with Imperial War Museum, January 2002, accession 22595, reel 1.
- ²¹ Great Britain, War Office, *Army Training Memorandum no. 36 "War"*, September 1940, 8.
- ²² John Dray, interview with Imperial War Museum, February 2004, accession 27053, reel 4.
- ²³ William Dilworth, interview with Imperial War Museum, July 1998, accession 18435, reel 2.
- ²⁴ Great Britain, War Office, *Physical and Recreational Training* (London: HMSO, 1941), 4.
- ²⁵ Great Britain, War Office, *Basic and Battle Physical Training: Part I, General Principles of Basic and Battle Physical Training and Methods of Instruction* (London: HMSO, 1944), 21.
- ²⁶ See for example, James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge, MA: University of Harvard Press, 2007), 96-104; Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health and Fitness in Britain, 1880–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 137-39.
- ²⁷ ‘Quality and variety of army’s meals’, *Manchester Guardian*, December 17, 1940, 6.
- ²⁸ War Office, *Basic and Battle Physical Training: Part I*; 25-27.
- ²⁹ James Wyndham, interview, reel 4.
- ³⁰ Private papers of David Evans, Imperial War Museum, Documents 2028, 8.
- ³¹ Robert Ellison, interview with Imperial War Museum, 1999, accession 18743, reel 6.
- ³² Walter Chalmers, interview with Imperial War Museum, 1999, accession 19805, reel 2.
- ³³ Roy Bolton, interview with Imperial War Museum, May 2002, accession 23195, reel 2.
- ³⁴ John Gray, interview with Imperial War Museum, March 2000, accession 20202, reel 3.
- ³⁵ John Dray, interview, reel 4.
- ³⁶ James Wyndham, interview, reel 5.
- ³⁷ William Dilworth, interview, reel 2.

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- ³⁸ James Wyndham, interview, reel 5.
- ³⁹ Bert Scrivens, interview with Imperial War Museum, February 2007, accession 29536, reel 2.
- ⁴⁰ Roy Bolton, interview, reel 3.
- ⁴¹ Leslie Gray, interview, reel 2.
- ⁴² James Wyndham, interview, reel 5.
- ⁴³ Neville Wildgust, interview with Imperial War Museum, 2002, accession 23848, reel 10.
- ⁴⁴ MOA, D. 5061.1, Diary for January 1941, 6.
- ⁴⁵ Russell King, interview with Imperial War Museum, September 1998, accession 18512, reel 5.
- ⁴⁶ Paul Ferris, *Sex and the British: A Twentieth-Century History* (London: Penguin, 1993), 43.
- ⁴⁷ William Dilworth, interview, reel 2.
- ⁴⁸ MOA TC29: men in the Forces 1939-1956, 2/D, Morris, Life in a Depot, January 1941, 4.
- ⁴⁹ MOA TC29: men in the Forces 1939-1956, 2/B, Leonard England, Morale Report, June 1941, 3.
- ⁵⁰ In the army homosexual acts were classified under the offence of "indecenty". An ordinary soldier found guilty of this crime faced up to two years' imprisonment, while an officer risked being cashiered (dismissed). Great Britain. War Office, *Manual of Military Law* (London: HMSO, 1940), 115.
- ⁵¹ Private papers of R.H. Lloyd-Jones, Imperial War Museum, Documents.125.
- ⁵² MOA TC29, Forces: Men in the Forces 1939-1956, 2/E, Life in a depot, 3.
- ⁵³ Recent estimates suggest that around 250,000 homosexual men served in the British armed forces between 1939 and 1945, but that up to 1,300,000 of the 6,508,000 men and women who served might have identified as "queer". See Emma Vickers, *Queen and Country: Same*

Sex Desire in the British Armed Forces, 1939-45 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 3-4.

⁵⁴ Campbell, *The Army Isn't All Work*, 25-30.

⁵⁵ Great Britain, War Office, *Basic and Battle Physical Training: Part II, Basic Physical Training Tables and Basic Physical Efficiency Tests* (London: HMSO, 1944), 4-6.

⁵⁶ War Office, *Basic and Battle Physical Training: Part II*, 15-16.

⁵⁷ Campbell, *The Army Isn't All Work*, 25-30.

⁵⁸ War Office, *Physical and Recreational Training*, 3.

⁵⁹ War Office, *Basic and Battle Physical Training: Part I*, 3.

⁶⁰ See G. Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.

⁶¹ Great Britain. War Office, *Army Training Memorandum no. 36*, September 1940, 6.

⁶² Great Britain. War Office, *Army Training Memorandum no. 42*, 1942, 24.

⁶³ Robert Ellison, interview, reel 3.

⁶⁴ Roy Bolton, interview, reel 2.

⁶⁵ John Dray, interview, reel 6.

⁶⁶ Robert Ellison, interview, reel 5.

⁶⁷ Hew Strachan, "Training, Morale and Modern War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (2006): 223-24.

⁶⁸ Vic Emery, interview with Imperial War Museum, January 2003, accession 24731, reel 3.

⁶⁹ Kenneth Johnstone, interview with Imperial War Museum, 1986, accession 9185, reel 2.

⁷⁰ MOA TC29, *Forces: Men in the Forces 1939-1956*, 2/E, Day to day life in the army, August 1940, 1.

⁷¹ Bert Blackall, interview with Imperial War Museum, June 2003, accession 23347, reel 2.

⁷² Roy Bolton, interview, reel 2.

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- ⁷³ Ian Sinclair, Interview with Imperial War Museum, 1991, accession 11468, reel 3.
- ⁷⁴ Robert Ellison, interview, reel 4.
- ⁷⁵ Francis A. Crew, *The Army Medical Services, Administration, Volume I* (London: HMSO, 1953), 352-353.
- ⁷⁶ Colonel S. Lyle Cummins, "Physical Development Centres," *Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps* 18, no.3 (1943): 184.
- ⁷⁷ Ernest Harvey, interview with Imperial War Museum, no date given, accession 14977, reel 3.
- ⁷⁸ Anthony Bashford, interview with Imperial War Museum, November 1992, accession 12907, reel 1.
- ⁷⁹ Crew, *Army Medical Services, Volume I*; 380.
- ⁸⁰ MOA D 5061.1, Diary for January 1941, 6.
- ⁸¹ "WW2 People's War Archive, A3331577," Percy Bowpitt for BBC, Last modified November 26, 2004. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/77/a3331577.shtml>. [accessed July 2018].
- ⁸² Strachan, "Training, morale and modern war," 216.
- ⁸³ War Office, *Physical and Recreational Training*, 9.
- ⁸⁴ War Office, *Basic and Battle Physical Training*, Part 1, 8.
- ⁸⁵ Tony Mason and Eliza Riedi, *Sport and the Military: The British Armed Forces, 1880–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- ⁸⁶ MOA TC29, Forces: Men in the Forces 1939–1956, 2/D, Morale report 2, 15 December 1940; 4.
- ⁸⁷ W.A. Elliot, *Esprit de Corps: A Scots Guards Officer on Active Service, 1943–1945* (Wimborne: Michael Russell, 1996), 105.
- ⁸⁸ War Office, *Physical and Recreational Training*, 3

⁸⁹ John Gray, interview, reel 3.

⁹⁰ Ron Gray, interview, reel 2.

⁹¹ James Wyndham, interview, reel 5.

⁹² Roy Bolton, reel 2.

⁹³ Crang, *The British Army*, 65.