

Written evidence submitted by Dr Sophy Antrobus and Hannah West**Women in the Armed Forces: From Recruitment to Civilian Life**

Dr Sophy Antrobus is a Research Associate at the Freeman Air and Space Institute, King's College London. She completed a PhD on the politics of air power in 2019. From 1991 to 2001, Sophy served in the Royal Air Force. During her undergraduate degree, Sophy joined Cambridge University Air Squadron. At the time, women could learn to fly on University Air Squadrons, but could not join the regular RAF as pilots or navigators. In 1989, the policy changed and Sophy successfully applied in 1991 to become an RAF pilot. She completed Initial Officer Training (where she broke her pelvis, a common injury for women in training at the time) and progressed to flying training. She was selected to fly fast jets and began her Advanced Flying Training at RAF Valley in 1995. Unfortunately, although she completed almost all on the course, she didn't make the standard required to graduate. She eventually retrained as a Flight Operations officer, starting her first tour in 1997 and rapidly progressed to promotion, reaching the rank of Wing Commander in 2006. Her tours included overseas deployments during an eighteen month tour with the Royal Navy on aircraft carriers and in Iraq, the wider Middle East and Afghanistan. She requested Premature Voluntary Release at the end of her command tour as Officer Commanding Operations at RAF Valley in 2010 and left the service in 2011.

Hannah West is a Postgraduate Researcher at the University of Bath. She has just submitted her PhD thesis on military power through women's stories of frontline combat from the British counterinsurgency campaigns of Malaya, Northern Ireland and Afghanistan. Hannah joined the Royal Navy in 2000 as a University Cadet Entrant completing her undergraduate degree in Aeronautical Engineering at Imperial College, London in service. In 2005, she trained as an Air Engineer Officer at HMS SULTAN before completing her Certificate of Competency training at RNAS CULDROSE. After her Squadron job, she joined the Military Stabilisation Support Group deploying to Afghanistan in 2009 as a stabilisation planner working in the Provincial Reconstruction Team. On her return she was based at MOD Abbey Wood where we worked as a Requirements Manager in Chinook Project Team during which time she was promoted to Lieutenant Commander. She then moved to Air Platform Systems Project Team working on the Mode 5 IFF Programme before leaving the Royal Navy on maternity leave in 2015.

The reason for this submission is to share our reflections on the gendered culture of the military that we believe underpin the questions about the experiences of female service personnel being addressed by this Inquiry. Our submission is based on a co-authored academic paper titled: "‘Deeply Odd’: Women veterans as critical veteran scholars' currently accepted but awaiting publication with the Critical Military Studies journal. This project was borne out of conversations between us, as two ex-servicewomen, about our memories of service and in particular our re-remembering of some 'Deeply Odd' incidents and behaviours we had experienced, many of which we hadn't recognised as 'odd', or worse, at the time. Our paper considers how our gendered military identity was constructed and negotiated such that we could not see our gendered experiences as 'deeply odd' when serving and can only see this now because our academic studies have challenged us to reflect critically. We had normalized our experiences at the time, but through these conversations we caught a glimpse behind the stage-set of a military we thought we understood and began to explore remembered experiences differently. We have been most shocked by our, previously unacknowledged, recollections of the sexualized and gendered character of this institution and we believe this insight will be valuable to the Inquiry in understanding questions of retention and willingness to make complaints, in particular.

Of course, we had agency while we were serving but we chose to subvert ourselves to the structure we had joined, rather than challenging it. That said, since we couldn't appreciate the strange nature of the institution we were trying to fit into – we couldn't see it for what it was – perhaps that also made it hard to resist. But going further we suggest that we started to believe our own rhetoric and stopped questioning inappropriate behaviours and potentially discriminatory practices in order to keep our heads down and make career progression. As a result, we couldn't see the 'deeply odd', an overlooked factor we believe has a significant influence on the conversation this Inquiry is trying to have.

However, in the arc of our military careers, we can see that our initial complicity hid an inner resistance that has only fully emerged now that we have reached a critical distance from our former lives. As we broke away from our military identities subsumed within a military culture, through conversations with each other, we began to ask questions of ourselves and others. We felt an increasing divergence with our friends and former colleagues who remained serving, experiencing our recollections being dismissed and any difference in treatment in the military between women and men being denied. The dismissal of the issue of discrimination by former colleagues exposed the tension between the association of soldiering with 'warriors', strength and masculinity and any potential admission of vulnerability which manifested itself in this conversational exchange.

As a result we decided it would be important to submit our evidence to you, as we argue in our paper that when immersed in military life, the institutionalization process may not give sufficient distance for those inside the institution to fully recognise problems of harassment, bullying and other inappropriate behaviours. There will be some women who would not think to submit evidence to this inquiry, anonymously or not, because they do not sit at a sufficiently critical distance from the world in which they are immersed.

We thought we would finish our submission with the transcripts of some of our conversations¹ which provide examples of our journey to recognising the 'deeply odd' in our former lives.

The 'deeply odd'

Hannah There was a small lockable cage onboard for women's underwear. And I remember at the time thinking well at least they've thought of that, there's somewhere for us to hang them.

Sophy How nice of them.

Hannah Implying that they weren't going to be swiped by any men. But now of course I look back on it and think why on earth did we need to lock away our underwear.

Sophy If you left your camera at the bar when you went to the loo or were buying a drink or something, you'd get back. There'd be a camera that you'd have to go and develop in those days, not digital or anything like that. And then you'd go to the

¹ These are extracts from conversations between the co-authors, reflected on in our paper, "'Deeply Odd': Women veterans as critical veteran scholars' (West and Antrobus, forthcoming)

chemist or send them away to Truprint or whatever. You'd get it back and there'd be a whole load of men's genitals. Cos they'd have swiped the camera, taken it away and taken lots of pictures just because they thought it was hilarious. The guy who'd done it to me one time had left his wristwatch on. We managed to work out who it was and posted it on the noticeboard with his name and everything. But it wasn't because we were trying to get him into trouble. Everyone thought it was funny, including us.

Hannah I totally remember someone who was bordering on hypothermia, he was not in a good way. We managed to get him a dry sleeping bag and yeh, I shared a sleeping bag with him just to keep him warm. And again, that wasn't at all weird. But I remember telling my mum about it later and her not really understanding the context of it and her finding that really strange.

Sophy So there were things that we did and we look back and think, that was a sensible thing to do but still seem odd from the outside. And then there were things that we don't really remember until we start talking about it that were deeply odd.

Hannah Yeh, yeh, really strange.

The Unseen

Sophy Even before I started school (in the mid 1970s) I wanted to be a pilot. In the mid 1980s I was told by my secondary school's career teacher that I was not allowed, because I was a woman, to fly either military or large commercial aircraft. I joined the RAF as a pilot when the rules changed and I was one of the first to make it to Fast Jet Flying Training although I failed in the final stages of the year-long course. At RAF Valley, flying the Hawk, I had asked to be protected from the media attention swirling around women trainee aircrew at the time. My Chief Flying Instructor responded to this request by pretending to invite me for a debrief on aircraft gunnery and then revealing a Sunday Express journalist when I arrived in his office for the meeting, forcing me to take part in an interview and photo shoot. I did as I was told and barely reflected on the experience until much later.

Hannah In basic training I remember making a concerted effort with a female friend to meet the male standard in passing the 2.5km run in under 11m 15s which we managed once before leaving. Six years later as the Air Engineer Officer for a squadron of 3 helicopters, I found myself managing a department of over 40 (predominantly male and older) engineers, but I always felt respected, accepted, treated on merit. I can see now that there was a part of me that joined up to prove to myself that I could hold my own physically and intellectually in this male domain, and still take pride in my professional achievements. But, I had buried the memories of former bosses acting inappropriately towards a young officer, the golf social it was assumed I

wouldn't want to take part, and the constant sexualized 'banter' about wives, girlfriends and celebrities. The inside for me meant that having your bra straps pinged undone from outside your shirt when working at a desk as a joke or hearing your male colleagues chatting away in the shared bathrooms at sea with only a thin curtain between your showers. Surely, these weren't my story of a fulfilling engineering career that took me all over the world, a career I have promoted to young girls at STEM talks.

Excavating our selves

Sophy The journey from veteran to researcher for me has been circular: from veteran to non-veteran to veteran again, but now as a subordinate but accepted element of my identity. I entered the academy keen to lose the 'label' of veteran. For me, being ex-RAF had become a definition of what I wasn't (anymore) rather than what I was. I subsequently found that I could engage again with contemporary military questions, but on different terms. When I was asked to write a *Guardian* opinion piece on a report into harassment and bullying in the military in the summer of 2019, I realized that if my veteran self had still been dominant, I would have rejected the opportunity as critical of 'colleagues' even though in this context the criticism was deserved. While my subordinate veteran self was important to my ability to critique and understand the subject, my dominant reflexive researcher self was the self with the necessary confidence, motivation and distance to write a critical piece that did not shy away from the reality of the problem within the services.

Hannah Being 'face to face' with the military again to present my research, I knew I needed to sound 'credible' to be heard. I had the advantage of being assumed to be one of them – I speak the same language of military jargon, I can introduce myself with familiar ranks, with experience of familiar operations: 'A Navy Lieutenant Commander who deployed on Herrick 10'. I want them to listen, I want them to hear what I have to say. And I feel a certain sense of being comfortable, I know what their expectations of me are, I even maybe feel a sense of loyalty to an organisation that was so formative to my development as a person. But I have a critical feminist perspective to convey. Standing up and saying I am going to be critical does not concern my audience: they are conversant with the use of 'lessons learnt' to inform policy. But when I start to ask questions about the nature of combat and soldiering and what it means for the gendered military institution it is a different kind of critical.

Hannah When I think of my former bosses, one stands out as having acted inappropriately when I was a young officer. But thinking about him is clear cut, his behaviour was wrong and is easily condemned. But I can think of other former colleagues who were professionally excellent, even inspirational, but who occasionally spoke about female colleagues in a distasteful way, nothing really inappropriate or that you

would consider reporting, really just mild banter. The charisma and warmth of these individuals made it easy to dismiss their comments as poorly judged or of a different generation. But even now, I find myself with mixed feelings towards them, with a sense that this is exactly the sort of behaviour that needs to change to challenge the ingrained organisational culture that sets the conditions for inappropriate behaviours.

Getting back together with serving and sometimes former military friends can feel uncomfortable too when I get into describing my critical research. I feel that they will see me as disloyal to what we think of as our shared experiences and even disapproving of their ongoing service. It can be hard to describe the transition from the military to academy without sounding as though you think you know better, you have new insights you couldn't see when serving so neither will they. And this sense of loyalty to the military can be testing. I grew up in the military, it shaped who I am and I struggle not to find myself talking about 'we' when talking about the Armed Forces. And yet these revelations about the gendered realities of service test how I negotiate memories of military service. I find myself struggling to reconcile the fulfilling and exciting formative experiences and amazing people with the uncomfortable reflections on the gendered institution.

Sophy

Thinking about my behaviours and those of my peers, friends, subordinates and commanders is complicated because I can see that I was complicit in the institution which sanctioned, or ignored, them. The line between what I always saw as unacceptable behaviour (assault, groping, discrimination in career progression) and what I only later came to see as unacceptable ('banter', patronising attitudes to gender equality and towards women) is hazy when I try and articulate it. In reviewing my military experience critically, I am self-conscious both of the potential for condescension in my attitude and for the accusation of hypocrisy. Stepping away from the institutionalised mindset of the military and into a role as a critical researcher has been liberating but also awkward.

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