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The "leaning song" – a weapon in organizational conflict

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present an insider ethnographic account of a series of social confrontations between two mutually opposed groups of officers that took place in an officers' mess in a remote military garrison in the 1980s. The identity of one of these groups was expressed in a particular song that was sung frequently and noisily in the mess. The analysis of these incidents and their precursors provides an understanding of the social processes in which they were embedded, and the conclusions drawn are generalized into the wider context.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on insider ethnography, using rich description to present the incidents and their background. Analysis is conducted using other research by the author on the organizational culture of Service officers and wider scholarship not specifically related to the Military.

Findings – The paper finds that in-groups and out-groups in joint Service populations do not necessarily run along traditional, Service, lines, and that cultural change in the groups concerned was associated with the rapid turnover of their members as they were replaced in the normal postings cycle. It demonstrates that a socially powerful shared cultural element can, if only temporarily, bring unity between rival groups. It also contributes to the scholarship on the power of song as a proclamation of group identity and the intensification of that identity.

Originality/value – The main strength of this paper is that it provides an insider's view of a British military social group, which is extremely rare in the literature, describing social processes that connect to the wider scholarship on song, in-group and out-group behaviour, and cultural change.

Keywords Social identity, British military, Insider ethnography, Organizational conflict, Song/singing, In groups and out groups

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The author, then an Army Officer, was posted[1] in the 1980s to a remote and comparatively isolated military garrison in a temperate zone in a country called, for the purposes of this paper, Carvenblor[2]. During a four month "emergency tour"[3] of duty he was a member of the force headquarters, known as HQ British Forces Carvenblor (abbreviated to HQBFC). This was an unusual headquarters for the time because it contained in roughly equal numbers members of all three Armed Services (Royal Navy, Army, and Royal Air Force (RAF)) and a smaller number of Civil Servants, almost all of whom were also in Carvenblor on four month tours[4]. At the time of his arrival, this headquarters occupied a set of buildings overlooking the small town of Merryman, the one seaport in Carvenblor, and its capital. After the first two months of the author's tour, HQBFC was relocated about 25 miles inland from its original location to a new building that had just been constructed as part of an expanding RAF station (RAF Marten). This station had been constructed inland in an uninhabited part of Carvenblor, probably for reasons of security on the one hand and a desire not to inflict the noise of an operational airfield on the local population on the other. Once the relocation had been completed, there was a certain degree of friction in the social arena of the officers' mess between the officers of the RAF station and those of the headquarters. This paper describes the relationship between the two groups and how it played out[5].

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The arena for this account is the social and physical construction of the "officers" mess'. In long established military practice a "mess" consists of a place of communal eating, sleeping, relaxing, socializing, and domestic practicalities such as washing, laundry, and bathing. In most British military institutions there are two messes, one for the officers and one for the warrant officers and sergeants[6] (and/or their RAF and Royal Navy equivalents). Their messes are exclusive to their members, so that, for example, a member of an officers' mess would not enter the sergeants' mess without an invitation and vice versa. Messes are viewed by their members as their "home" while they are accommodated in them, and so are a key resource for both private personal space and for social activity, especially when groups are serving "unaccompanied"[7], as was the case during the events described here. In keeping with the idea of "home", the custom is for behaviour in the mess to be convivial and, if disagreements arise, they should be carried out as far as possible with a degree of politeness. If that is not possible then the issues should be settled outside the mess building. Open confrontation can of course occur, but it is normally considered impolite and a break of convention and is rare.

An important practical element throughout the events described in this paper is the length of time that individuals spent deployed to Carvenblor. As the majority of all ranks were on four month tours people passed from raw newcomer to experienced hand relatively quickly and all the professional (and by extension social) groups that formed had a rapid turnover of members. Although the groups themselves appeared to be stable – HQBFC and RAF Marten persisted relatively unchanged in structure and size through time – their membership changed radically over a period of about 18 weeks.

The two locations

The HQBFC building at Merryman was sited on the edge of the town, and was easily identified by the array of aerials and the satellite communications dish on its roof, and by the flagpole and large sign outside its main entrance. It was not, however, impressive. Of brick and stone construction, it had been derelict when the headquarters was set up about four years before the events described here. Although it had been improved it was still shabby on the outside and dilapidated on the inside. It was in urgent need of decoration, had a mysterious but persistent smell that might have included fish, and a small spring had forced its way through the foundations and trickled down the main corridor. The office facilities were dingy and seemed uncared for. There was a heating system but it was not reliable.

The local military accommodation (known as Rocky Camp) was about a mile from the headquarters building in uneven open country, approachable only by an unmetalled road. It consisted of arrays of uncarpeted portakabins, mostly for sleeping accommodation (much of it shared) but there were also a number of ablutions blocks, a cookhouse[8] for the junior personnel, and separate sergeants' and officers' messes. Each of the messes contained a sitting area ("ante room"), and a bar, and each had a separate dining room/kitchen hut. Heating for all buildings was by fitted electric fires that made a loud clang when their thermostats operated, making sleeping difficult if they were switched on. The huts were uncomfortably cold when they were not. It was not a comfortable place to live.

RAF Marten, on the other hand, was much smarter and more comfortable. It had been operational for several months before the events described in this paper, although construction was still continuing. It already contained everything that a RAF station

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needed, including a runway, large well-constructed hangers, storage buildings, office blocks, a RAF command centre, a full suite of communications, and accommodation. All were recently and sturdily built, clean, fresh, and with UK-standard heating systems and plumbing. A new purpose-built HQBFC building was finished shortly after the author had arrived in Carvenblor and for that reason the headquarters was due to move to RAF Marten. This new building was not only modern, comfortable, and climate controlled, but it was also strengthened against possible air attack, something that the Merryman building was not. At the starting point of this narrative the HQ had not yet moved from Merryman to RAF Marten.

Rocky camp officers mess

HQBFC had, like all operational headquarters, a preponderance of officers (about 30), so the author spent most of his time exclusively in the company of his fellow-officers, especially when he was off duty. For this reason, this ethnographic account is centred on life in the officers' messes in both locations.

Despite its general discomfort and its very temporary and run-down appearance, the Rocky Camp officers' mess was a lively and friendly place. Any individual could find convivial company in the bar both before and after meals and the conversation was usually engaging and animated. Such conversation encompassed a wide variety of subjects and anybody was welcome to join in or to walk away, without comment or criticism. In the absence of television (because Carvenblor was too remote for satellite TV coverage at that time and there was no local TV station), videos were played each evening in the "TV room". Often those present would make jokes about what was passing on the screen and anyone passing by this room while a video was in play was likely to hear a mixture of laughter, groans, and occasional cheering.

The most regular communal event was, however, the evening meal in the dining hut. Apart from the conversation during dinner, which was usually cheerful enough, when the meal was drawing to a close those present would often join each other in singing. The favourite songs were raucous and funny and involved making a great deal of noise. And the favourite song of all was the Leaning Song:

> The room is unlike a conventional officers' mess dining room. The furniture is basic – metal framed chairs and tables, plastic surfaces to eat off rather than polished wood, paper napkins rather than damask, and the floor is tiled in durable plastic instead of carpet. The lighting is by several stark fluorescent tubes, one of which has ceased to function. It cannot be replaced for at least a week while a new one is demanded and sent out from UK. The conversation is buoyant, with the majority of the participants engaged and jovial. Suddenly and without warning one of the diners starts apparently to wail. "Leeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee" he cries on a single note. The conversation dies down, everyone smiles and the sound changes to form a string of words
>
> "Leeeeean forwards,
Lean backwards,
To the left and to the right,
Stand up, sit down,
To the left and to the right"
>
> And as the leader sings everyone joins in with the song – which has a strong 3/4 rhythm and very singable tune – and they start to move in accordance to the words, or rather, in the opposite direction to those suggested by the words. They start by leaning backwards in their chairs, then forwards, to the right and to the left, remain seated at "stand up" and spring to their feet at "sit down", and end by leaning to the right and then to the left. The song is sung twice and ends in cheering and clapping. While it is in progress those who get the actions

> wrong are pointed at and laughed at. They join in the laughter. And, like all the activities within HQBFC, there is no evidence of inter-Service difference. All present, be they members of the Royal Navy, the RAF or the Army or Civil Service embrace the singing of the song.

As a newcomer, the author found this joyful teamwork between members of the different Armed Forces and the Civil Service somewhat surprising. In his previous experience he had found that the organizational cultures of the four Services were very different and their members regularly distanced themselves from each other. "Jointery" – the close operational cooperation of the Services – was a comparatively rare experience at the time. The prevailing Cold War conditions tended to separate the Armed Services in training and in planning: the Royal Navy operated on, above and below the ocean; the Army's main operational effort went into the land environment in North West Europe well away from the sea; the primary operational missions for which the RAF trained involved the "counter air war", a long way from the Army's front line. "Counter air" operations only involved very slight liaison with the Army or Royal Navy. While there was limited tactical cooperation between the RAF and the other two services (maritime patrol aircraft, for example, cooperated with the Royal Navy and a small number of ground attack aircraft and helicopters were allocated to support the Army directly on the battlefield), few members of the different Armed Services normally met each other except for the small number who were posted to large operational headquarters in Europe (Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers, Europe, for example). Overall, for those who had little or no joint experience the other Services were alien groups and there was considerable rivalry, misunderstanding and mutual stereotyping between them. This was represented, for example, in the author's day-to-day observations prior to his Carvenblor tour while he was serving in the Ministry of Defence. In particular, he had noted that low prestige was given to the joint Service "central staff" in the early 1980s. In contrast, the people with kudos were put to work in single Service staffs to make what were seen as the more important decisions. In essence, the cultural differences between the Services were strong and led generally to negative stereotyping across Service boundaries and the general absence of mutual trust.

In having relatively balanced numbers of members of the Armed Services, the joint headquarters in Carvenblor was therefore of unusual organizational structure. Few of its members had worked so closely hitherto with members of other Services and most tended to hold (and the author was no exception) strong biases against other Services and in favour of their own when they arrived.

The one operation where joint warfare had been experienced recently was the Falklands War in 1982 where cooperation between the Armed Services had been essential. Even there, however, there was a distinct separation between air, maritime, amphibious, and land operations with support being rendered across the boundaries from one domain to another as required – naval shore bombardment in support of land operations, for example. Although the campaign was a remarkable success, given the operational conditions under which it was fought, where members of different Services came into contact there was still evidence of mutual stereotyping and misunderstanding (Hastings and Jenkins, 1983, pp. 237, 278; Southby-Tailyour, 1993, pp. 250, 294-304).

Since the 1980s a growing number of increasingly joint operations have been launched and permanent joint facilities have been created with membership from all four Services. The hitherto separate Armed Services staff colleges have been brought

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together to form the Joint Services Command and Staff College at Shrivenham, for example, and there is a Permanent Joint Headquarters at Northwood near London. In Afghanistan, in particular, all three Armed Services have cooperated closely and the "joint experience" is becoming more and more common and deemed extremely important. Nevertheless, this author discovered in recent research (Kirke, 2012) that inter-Service rivalry still exists, that mutually disparaging stereotypes of "other" Services are still common currency and that single Service concerns and identities are still viewed as of great importance (see also Peter *et al.*, 2011, pp. 3, 7). It is not surprising, therefore, that at the time of the incidents described in this paper the natural assumption for members of the different Services was that the others were alien, different, and subject to negative constructions of "the other".

It was all the more unexpected therefore to discover that there was a strong, widely embraced bond between members of HQBFC irrespective of Service membership. It appeared to the author, acting as both insider participant and observer, that the less than ideal conditions in Rocky Camp were a contributory factor to the obviously high morale of his fellow-officers. It appeared that all were experiencing the bonding effect of common adversity, and making the best of it. If the choice were between smiling and moaning, then the social norm was to smile. This probably reflected the military culture of the members of the group, where mutual support, encouragement, and humour were important common resources in conditions of discomfort and danger in all three Armed Services.

Moving to the RAF marten officers' mess

Two months after the author arrived in Carvenblor HQBFC moved from Merryman to RAF Marten, to work in the newly finished purpose built headquarters building and to live in the RAF Marten accommodation. In the case of the officers, of course, this meant that they transferred to the Station Officers' Mess. For the first time all the HQBFC staff had individual rooms, adequately heated, they had the use of comfortable showers which they could reach without going outside the building, and they had carpets on their floors. These conditions contrasted starkly with the rougher and less comfortable surroundings of Rocky Camp and it might be expected that they would be happily embraced by those who moved in. But also, for the first time, they found themselves part of a much larger body of officers occupying the Officers' Mess.

The occupants of the mess before HQBFC's arrival were overwhelmingly from the RAF. As is normal on an RAF station there were people engaged in flying, engineering, administration, personnel management, fighter control, air traffic control, local air defence, catering, and so on. This amounted to a considerable body of officers, numbering about 100. There were also a small number of Royal Naval logistic officers and Royal Engineers[9] but between them they amounted to no more than 12 individuals.

At first, there was no sign of tension between those who were already in the mess and the 30 or so who had arrived from Merryman. Indeed, the newcomers were welcomed politely and very shortly after they arrived both they and the existing members all took part in a celebratory evening meal to mark Burns Night.

During this Burns Night celebration, the normal layout of the dining hall was used, with a number of tables, each accommodating eight diners, scattered round the room. The lead was taken by the Scotsmen present, mostly those from RAF Marten because the newcomers from HQBFC had barely had time to settle into the mess. It was a convivial evening with the usual Burns Night menu of haggis and bashed neaps

(nobody said where the ingredients came from as neither were common fare in Carvenblor), lots of whisky and many recitations of Burns' work. There was even someone to play the bagpipes (Figure 1).

Difficulties did, however, emerge over the next few days. The established members began to show that their vision of the mess was first and foremost that of a RAF one. RAF officers began to object to the forms of dress worn by Army and Royal Naval personnel because they did not conform to the Mess Rules, codified for RAF custom and practice. For example, a Guards officer was upbraided for wearing his stable belt[10] on the outside of his uniform jumper at lunch time. A RAF officer approached him politely but firmly and said "Excuse me, but we don't wear our belts in the Mess", to which the reply came back from the Guards officer "Oh, really? We do" and he pointedly went back to reading his newspaper. Both individuals felt themselves to have been snubbed when they subsequently described the incident to the author. Such challenges and responses emphasized social differences and contributed to the creation of social barriers that became increasingly obvious. The timing of the evening meal, for instance, became an issue. The Mess Committee insisted that it ran between 1830 and 1930, making no concessions to the Royal Naval and Army conventions that dinner would normally be an hour later. The conventions of behaviour in the mess bar were kept as RAF conventions (after all the vast majority of those who visited it were in the RAF), which made the Army and Royal Navy officers feel excluded. One particular issue irritated Army and Royal Naval members of HQBFC: this concerned dress for the evening meal. In a Royal Navy or Army officers' mess it would be unusual for individuals to turn up in their working clothes in the evening unless they were on duty. The expected dress was smart civilian clothes. However, in RAF messes aircrew normally wear their military flying suits whether or not they are on duty or on call. One pilot even arrived at RAF Marten in civilian clothes for a non-flying short staff liaison visit but donned his flying suit for the evening. This attracted some quiet derision from Army and Royal Naval officers but he was congratulated by his RAF colleagues for "showing form".

Overall, these disagreements amounted to an unwillingness to compromise among both the RAF Marten members and those from HQBFC and this led to cooling of relations between the two groups in the very place where conventionally the

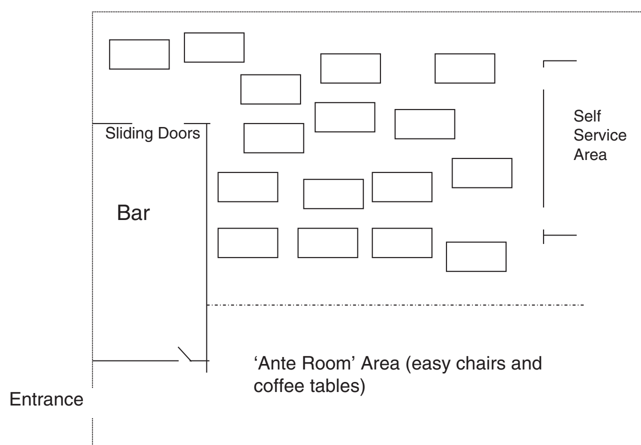

Figure 1.
Layout of the dining area for the burns night dinner

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atmosphere was expected to be relaxed and warm. None of these difficulties had occurred in the Merryman officer's mess, even though it contained members of all four Services. Nobody had tried to enforce what were seen as minor mess rules, there had been compromise over the timing of the evening meal such that everybody turned up at about the same time, valuing the company more than "proper" meal times. By the prevailing convention in Rocky Camp everyone was considered both equal and welcome. The apparent lack of compromise in the RAF Marten mess was a stark contrast.

Indeed, so sharp was this contrast that RAF officers who had been members of the Merryman Mess were heard saying that the RAF Marten officers were being silly towards HQBFC mess members and tried to reason with them as fellow-members of the RAF. No change, however, was observed.

It was then decided by the HQBFC officers, about ten days after the relocation, that they would have a mess dinner. No RAF Marten officers would be invited to join in: it was to be a celebration of the identity of HQBFC. Unlike at the Burns Night, a separate long table was to be created for the occasion by placing five of the eight-seaters end to end. The members would sit along each side while the senior ranking member present would sit as president at one end and the most junior member would sit at the other. The remainder of the tables remained scattered elsewhere in the dining room as usual for the use of RAF Marten officers. The timing was of HQBFC's choosing, disregarding the mess convention, with the meal starting at 1,915. This dinner proceeded relatively quietly by the Merryman mess standards, though there was somewhat more noise coming from the table than was usual in that dining room (Figure 2).

When the meal was over the president gave a short speech. Those present applauded lustily by cheering, clapping, or hitting the table with the flat of their hands, creating a joyful noise and making the coffee cups and wine glasses jump. Then someone started, "Leeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee …", and the Leaning Song followed much to the enjoyment of all at the dinner. The song was repeated two or three more times over the next 15 minutes and then the president left the table, thus giving permission for those present to disperse.

It was obvious the next day that the Leaning Song had worried and upset some of the RAF Marten members and that they were anxious about the apparently raucous behaviour of the HQBFC staff. They seemed to consider it aggressive against them and

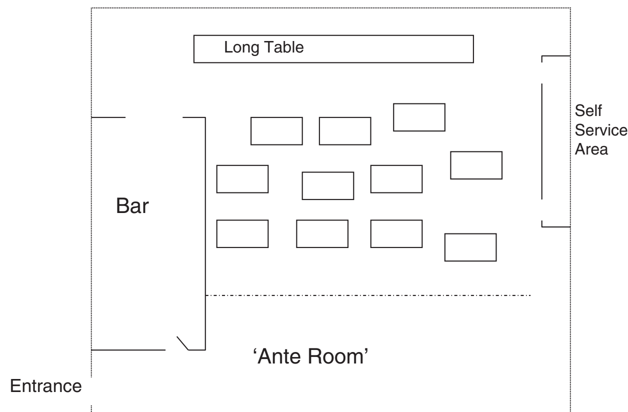

Figure 2.
Layout of the dining area for HQBFC dinner

disruptive to the smooth running of the mess. The friction between the HQBFC officers and the RAF Marten officers was not smoothed by this occasion. Conflict continued, generally within the bounds of strained politeness, with increasing numbers of small incidents of rivalry and the taking of personal and corporate offence.

Over the next few days there were several occasions when small or large groups of HQBFC officers spontaneously broke into the Leaning Song in the evening and it was sung several more times at their next dinner, (to bid farewell to some of their members who were being posted away), about ten days later. Although normally it would be expected that the farewell speeches would be the centerpiece of such occasions they were eclipsed by those several iterations of the Leaning Song and by the applause and cheering which routinely followed each one.

And then there was an air accident, in which officers from RAF Marten died.

The atmosphere of the mess immediately changed. The conflict was suspended. Among the serious and complex activity on a RAF station that must follow an air accident, a mess dinner was set up for RAF Marten air crew and engineers[11] to commemorate their dead colleagues. Just as for the HQBFC mess dinners, a long table was set up for those at the dinner and the other mess members ate at smaller tables dispersed in other parts of the large dining room. As before, the two sets of diners did not interact, but, whatever their affiliation, everyone in the room fell silent when the president gave the toast "To absent friends".

After this moment of unity, however, over the next few days the difficulties between the two groups of mess members gradually reasserted themselves and there were several incidents (including a major one in the bar which broke the convention of polite behaviour) that expressed and restated the hostility between them. The next HQBFC dinner (about three weeks after the accident) was going to be a major occasion as an unusually large number of members of the HQ were to be posted away over the next two weeks or so. Given the continuing difficulties in the mess, somebody within the group suggested that it should take place in the old Merryman mess as a farewell to that as well. The idea was embraced enthusiastically, and so it happened. The occasion was as joyous, loud, and friendly as life at Merryman had ever been, in spite of the scruffy and dingy environment. All those about to leave sang their own song or gave a recitation, each to loud applause, and there were several performances of the Leaning Song.

This occasion was the high spot for the Leaning Song. Although it was sung in the RAF Marten mess a few times over the following days, the numbers of the erstwhile members of the Merryman mess dwindled as individuals were posted out. Somehow the incomers did not embrace it as enthusiastically as those who had gone. Over the same period the friction in the mess diminished with the turnover of personnel in RAF Marten and HQBFC. By the time that the author left Carvenblor three weeks after the farewell dinner at Merryman (and eight weeks after the redeployment to RAF Marten) the number of divisive incidents had declined to what members seemed to accept as an irreducible minimum. Dress conventions for example, settled down to individual Service traditions, meal timings were generally accepted, and there had been no more HQBFC dinners and none were planned. Individuals began mixing with their counterparts across the different groups, particularly if they had experiences in common (such as sporting occasions or shared trips to see the local wild life, or even having found themselves travelling together to Carvenblor at the start of their tours). The mess had an air of polite mutual tolerance and the members in general kept their irritations to themselves. Essentially, the rivalry and friction simply faded away.

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Analysis

This description of the events in the two officers' messes raises a number of points of ethnographic interest. Apart from constituting a description of a military community – a rare occurrence in ethnography – the main issues are the in-group and out-group behaviours displayed, the privileging of corporate grief over inter-group differences, the use of song as a symbol of identity, and the speed with which serious and apparently unbridgeable differences between the groups diminished.

The position of the researcher

Before these issues are discussed, the position of the researcher as a full member of the HQBFC staff and an ethnographer needs to be addressed. Such "insider anthropology" has a niche in the academic literature (see, e.g. Jackson, 1987; Young, 1991; Cerroni-Long, 1995; Forsythe, 2001) and has been the subject of work elsewhere by the author (Kirke, 2013). This latter work proposed a typology of "insiderness". At one extreme of this typology is research within bounded exotic communities that coexist with the researcher's own society. These groups, although situated "at home" in the researcher's country, are really equivalent to the "other cultures" of conventional anthropology. The centre ground of the typology are studies where the researcher is familiar with the human groups concerned but not full members of them, and the other extreme comprises studies where the researcher is a full member of the group, true "anthropology from within". The case in hand – analysis of the behaviour in the Officers' Mess at RAF Marten fits this third category precisely.

Anthropology from within presents a range of advantages and limitations. The researcher has total immersion in the group being observed, and can expect to be sensitive to their shared attitudes, expectations, and assumptions. They have greater access to the group of interest than an outsider might expect, shared experiences which help both in communication with the group and the establishment of empathy with their point of view, and a deep understanding of their culture (Labaree, 2002, p. 103). Thus s/he has a powerful set of tools to identify both issues of major concern to the group's members and their cultural norms. On the other hand, there is a serious difficulty in that the researcher cannot have the "stranger value" that is so valued in classical social anthropology (Beattie, 1966), a problem so acute for Jaffe that she found she had to abandon her attempt to carry out fieldwork on the US Army while she was a member (Jaffe, 1995). There is a danger that the researcher's analysis will be contaminated and distorted by their embeddedness in the culture being researched. For instance, how could a full member of the HQBFC remain objective? How could they distance him/herself either from the joyous singing of the Leaning Song or the shared irritation that came from the RAF Marten members' observed attitudes and behaviours towards "us"?

These are key questions because they significantly affect the value of the output of an insider study such as this one. The researcher therefore needs to develop tools and methods by which s/he can exploit the advantages of "insiderness" while avoiding the collapse of "distance" into "going native". For this study, the author addressed these issues by artificially creating two different points of view, that of "me, the participant" and the objective view of "the anthropologist". In addressing the lived experiences of being part of the HQBFC group "me, the participant" captured the feelings and the flow of events whilst "the anthropologist" reflected upon them in the light of his experience as a researcher and his knowledge of the scholarship in anthropology. The most frequently asked question during these reflections was "what would the anthropologist

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say?" Interestingly, this approach is almost identical to that adopted later by Simon Collins (1998, 2002) in his entirely unconnected study of a Quaker meeting of which he was warden. In his case he adopted two complementary *personae*, "Simon" the insider and "Peter" the outsider anthropologist.

The construction and maintenance, however, of these two distinct personae within one mind was not straightforward. It required concentrated reflexive thought on what "me the participant" had actually seen and experienced and, in contrast, when "the anthropologist" constructed his analysis he was continuously having to shake off the raw feelings and assumptions of "me, the participant". In this study the issue was addressed by deliberately and self-consciously spending time in one persona or another, reflecting before and after about the success or otherwise of the attempt.

This duality, "the anthropologist" and "me, the participant" is not only embedded in the research that led to this paper, but it is also demonstrated in its structure. The first part, from "The Two Locations" section to "Moving to the RAF Officers' Mess" is a narrative in the voice of "me, the participant" (with his observations prompted and sharpened by his alter ego) describing the context and the chain of events while the second part – the Analysis section – is the work of "the anthropologist" (prompted by "me, the participant" to pay attention to what felt for him to be significant in his lived experience in the RAF Marten Officers' Mess).

Antagonistic groupings in the officers' mess

In-group and out-group behaviours and constructions of "the other" are well-known social phenomena addressed across the spectrum of the social sciences (see, for instance Douglas, 1966; Howard and Rothbart, 1980; Eriksen, 2001, pp. 264-266; Rapport and Overing, 2007, pp. 391-397). Scholarship in this area has developed since the earlier more static ideas about social classification such as those put forward by Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and Mair (1965) towards a more dynamic conception of social groupings that gives greater understanding of observed phenomena. In particular, the processes involved in the construction of distinction between groups (the differentiation between "us" and "them") and their causes and consequences has been one of the enduring themes of social psychology since the 1960s (see, e.g. Brewer, 2003, p. ix; Hogg *et al.*, 2004). Within that discipline, a pertinent set of ideas for examining the behaviour in the RAF Marten officers' mess is provided by social identity theory, as developed by a succession of social psychologists from the seminal work of Tajfel and Turner in the 1970s (in particular Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel and Turner, 1979, and see also Tajfel and Turner, 1986). This theory proposes that individuals develop a social identity through seeing themselves as belonging to an array of groups (a process known as "self-categorization"). Because of the basic human need to enhance the self, people will naturally do their best to enhance and conserve the prestige of their own groups in opposition or comparison to other groups. This process naturally creates potentially strong differences between the groups of which the individuals self-categorize themselves as members (their in-groups) and the out-groups to which they make comparisons (Hogg *et al.*, 2004, pp. 225-226). In this process, out-groups can often be associated with inferiority of status and value and subject to stereotyping (Allport, 1958). The experience of being a member of a group also satisfies the human need to minimize uncertainty as its members embrace the group's norms and thus acquire a shared and predictable body of feelings and behaviours (Hogg, 2000).

Nobody simultaneously exercises membership of all the groups to which they feel that they belong because membership of all of those groups does not apply in all

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situations. An individual's self-categorization as a member of a particular group needs to be made relevant, or "rendered salient" (Hewstone *et al.*, 2012), by being in a relevant context before it has any effect. In the case of the incidents described in this paper, for example, the working teams in which everyone operated in various parts of the airfield during working hours were not relevant to life in the officers' mess, so membership of the groupings in the officers' mess was not salient at work.

In summary, the social psychological concept of social identity can help to frame an understanding of the events described above. The officers in the RAF Marten officers' mess self-categorized as members of either HQBFC or RAF Marten and exercised their social identity in the mess context accordingly by exaggerating the differences between them, and assigning inferiority to "the other".

Interestingly, at the time of the incidents described, members of the Armed Services as a whole already had an advanced sense of social identity, but the categorization of in-groups and out-groups generally ran on Single Service lines, as described above. In the Army, for example, there was a long standing set of social classifications, named by the author the "loyalty/identity structure" (Kirke, 2009). This classification consists in a nesting series of in-groups framed in Army organizational culture as rising from the smallest organizational grouping of soldiers (a small team of about four) in organizational steps up to the whole Army, each grouping considering themselves "better" than the others at any comparable point on the scale[12]. For soldiers, "The Army" was culturally defined as "better" than the other two Armed Services, with the RAF especially seen as socially, operationally, and organizationally inferior. This social process did not apply just to the Army. When the Royal Navy worked with the RAF as, for instance on an aircraft carrier, even in the wardroom (the officers' mess) members of the two Services generally kept themselves apart and would remark on the professional incompetence of the other (author's observation). The RAF air crew frequently were heard expressing scorn for the aircraft engineering support of the Royal Navy, which was much reduced compared to their own, and the Royal Navy air crew and aircraft controllers generally let it be known that they did not consider RAF pilots to be competent to work in the special conditions of a ship which pitched, rolled, and moved about the ocean (author's observation).

It was therefore to be expected that, if there were to be divisions in HQBFC, these divisions would be along Service lines. The reality, as we have seen, was entirely different, as members of all three Armed Services and the small number of Civil Servants united in providing a socially bonded group whose members embraced and supported each other in the uncomfortable conditions of Rocky Camp[13]. Essentially, in-group and out-group issues were not apparent and a mess culture had emerged in which every member was a full and equal part of the whole group. This organizational culture had been maintained through multiple changes of members by the continued exercise of its conventions in daily life (Schatzki *et al.*, 2001): the dramatis personae had changed but the script had not.

After the move of HQBFC to RAF Marten, the expectation of the author was that the RAF members of the headquarters would embrace the RAF-dominated culture of the mess, leaving the Army, Royal Navy, and Civil Servant members as outsiders. Again, this expectation was entirely wrong and the mess was divided strongly into two different groups, both containing RAF officers but mutually characterized as "the other". The differences between the groups were played out in concerns over, principally, dress, meal timings, exclusive behaviour such as the HQBFC dinners and the singing of the Leaning Song. Essentially, the strong bonding of the in-group at

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Merryman was carried seamlessly into the new location against the then normal expectations of inter-Service relationships. Shared recent history and established social cohesion and self-categorization into the HQBFC group triumphed over long established grouping conventions.

Why then, was the reaction of the HQBFC members to the deaths of RAF Marten personnel from the air accident effectively to declare a truce? Although the mess was as divided as ever, when the accident happened all hostilities were suspended. As the dead personnel were from RAF Marten and not from HQBFC, it might be argued that, in the light of the toxic relations between the two groups, expressions of difference might have continued. However, the deaths united all members of the mess, if only for a few days.

A possible explanation may be drawn from the social psychological concept of "superordinate goals", where two groups find it necessary to work together for their mutual benefit in the face of a practical problem that affects them both (Hewstone *et al.*, 2012), a concept that was first articulated after an experiment with groups of 12-year-old boys on an American summer camp (Sherif *et al.*, 1961). Although there was no practical need for members of HQBFC and RAF Marten to cooperate, it could be argued that both groups were united in the superordinate goal of respecting the dead (framed as a military cultural imperative), with the public mourning activity being carried out in the presence of all parties by the subset of the RAF Marten group that held their dinner. This acceptance of a single superordinate goal may well have been all the more natural because of the common experience of all present that the military profession is dangerous. Death stalks soldiers, airmen, and sailors alike and casualties are treated by all Services as major events for which special behaviour is appropriate. This behaviour includes unity in the expression of grief and regret in the name of respecting the dead. Everyone knew then and knows now that quarrelling is not a proper way to behave when deaths occur and that mutual respect and shared grief are socially required. Suddenly, and for a time, everyone had something in common, therefore, and this created one single overall in-group that transcended the divided social structure which had hitherto prevailed.

Singing

The choice of a song as a symbol of group bonding for the HQBFC mess members also follows a long tradition in the military and elsewhere. Songs and other music that express group identity have been common in the Army since before it was permanently constituted (Winstock, 1970, pp. 66-67, 76-77, 123-125, 232-235; 1971, pp. 42-43; Palmer, 1977, pp. 29-30, 145-147; Butler, 1997, pp. 34-38), and sea shanties have long been shared property of sailors (Hurd, 1965).

There is evidence from the social psychology and wider social science literature that singing has a specific unifying effect which may have lent power to the bonding of HQBFC officers through repeated performances of the Leaning Song. Giles *et al.* (2009) suggest that there are links between Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory and corporate preferences for, and performances of, music. Similar work by Scheepers *et al.* (2003) examines the role of corporate singing in football crowds, and shows that the expression and confirmation of identity is an important result. Klein *et al.* (2007) conclude that "social identity performance can fulfill two general functions", one of which is "affirming, conforming, or strengthening individual or group identities".

Bensimon (2012) has examined the properties of singing in a particular protest movement to increase corporate bonding and induce a feeling of empowerment, having

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previously noted (Bensimon, 2009) that the type of song had an effect on the perceived identity of the protesters: a strong rhythm provoked negative feelings in the security forces ranged against them but quiet, less rhythmic songs evoked their empathy. This may be particularly relevant to the message projected by the Leaning Song as not only was it an obvious symbol of group identity and strength but it also had a strong rhythm.

Furthermore, singing combined with corporate bodily movement as in the Leaning Song has been found by Wiltermuth and Heath (2009, p. 1) to have a particular bonding effect: "acting in synchrony with others can increase cooperation by strengthening social attachment among group members".

It seems likely, therefore, that the unifying effects of the Leaning Song were made particularly powerful by the circumstances. It was so simple that anybody could pick it up quickly and therefore participate, it involved corporate action, and it had a strong rhythm. It is a point for discussion beyond the scope of this paper whether the song just happened to have these characteristics and became a vector for bonding by chance or whether it became popular *because* it has these features.

The decay of in-groups and out-groups in the officers' mess

Finally, why did the bonding of the HQBFC group, and the use of the Leaning Song, decay so rapidly in the last three weeks of the author's emergency tour? And what explanation is there for the very swift change in HQBFC and the wider officers mess culture?

In his classic analysis, Anthony Giddens (1984) proposed that previous models of social structure were generally too static. He sought to insert a dynamic element through his concept of "structuration" and the inclusion of "agency" (freedom of individual action) in a new model. In his concept, human groups had social structure but this social structure had no independent existence: it was embedded solely in the minds of the members of the group. As each person in the group was always "free to act otherwise" and go against the norms embedded in that structure then no social structure could ever be permanent. The individual actors could always change it by acting otherwise. Through time, therefore, it is possible, and indeed likely, that any social structure could evolve into a new form. He named this process of the evolution of structure through the collective action of agents "structuration". Thus any change in organizational culture can be perceived as the results of this process.

The experience of organizational managers who seek rapid change has generally been that the process is inherently slower and more unpredictable than expected. Resistance to change may come in one or more forms, described by this author as "cultural inertia" (no change takes place because the agents do not change their behaviour), "cultural drag"[14] (agents change behaviour, but not as fast as expected), "cultural precession"[15] (change takes place but not in the expected direction), and "cultural recidivism" (change takes place but people return to the old way of doing things after a time). In the first few days at RAF Marten resistance on the part of HQBFC was firm and solid, with all the characteristics of profound cultural inertia. Why then did this resistance fade away so quickly over the next eight weeks or so?

In the analysis presented here, the key factor for the HQBFC group is the rapid turnover of personnel. The social structure at Merryman was relatively stable, with little change through the processes of structuration because few, if any, of the members

(the agents) saw or felt any reason to "act otherwise" and newcomers embraced the existing social structure and made it their own. The cohort that made the move to RAF Marten continued in that frame of mind, and the existing members of the RAF Marten mess also saw no reason to change the way that they behaved. However, newcomers to HQBFC and RAF Marten after the move had no experience of the status quo ante and gradually the numbers of new personnel increased at the expense of the old hands who were posted away. This process effectively provided an accelerated form of structuration in that new agents acquired their modes of behaviour in the mess not only from the HQBFC and RAF Marten traditions but also from their own previous experience of messes (privileging politeness). Furthermore, where there were pre-existing links between members of the two groups (no matter how trivial) then confrontation between them seemed pointless. The numerically superior RAF Marten mess members gradually lowered their insistence on doing things the "RAF way" as the population was replaced and made the small compromises on mess rules and systems mentioned above. This encouraged the newly arriving HQBFC officers to adapt to the mess conditions.

Using Giddens' structuration model, therefore, the process can be presented as follows: Structure A (customary conflict between the two groups in the Officers' Mess) changed to Structure B (a new, more cooperative and mutually tolerant mode of behaviour) through structuration, but this process of structuration was accelerated by the replacement of mutually hostile individual agents by those who chose to act otherwise.

Conclusion

The events described and analyzed took place in a small isolated British garrison some 30 years ago. Are they an historical curiosity, an ethnographic blind alley, or can wider lessons be drawn from them? This paper addresses four issues in particular which are of significance outside Carvenblor in the 1980s. The first is probably more specific to the British Services than further afield. This study indicates that inter-Service rivalry is not inevitable and that social groups are not compelled to form along Service lines. Thus, no profound change in culture has been needed to establish the joint military organizational, command, and training initiatives that have arisen over the past ten years. Nevertheless, this case also indicates that it is important to guard against the formation of groupings with strong identities if they are going to appear toxic to other groupings.

Second, the events described add to the evidence about the force of song as both a symbol of group identity and as a force for making social identity more intense, particularly if it is combined with synchronous bodily movement and strong rhythm. Third, there are implications for the study of organizational cultural change, the most prominent of which is that rapid turnover of members speeds the process of structuration. Finally, even under conditions of intense mutual opposition it is possible that unity can be created where circumstances impinge dramatically on shared elements of culture.

Carvenblor may or may not still have a British garrison, and all those involved in the clashes that took place in RAF Marten officers mess will have retired by now. But ethnographers should certainly be encouraged to research the British Services, a fascinating and arcane human group. Maybe someone might even find in another remote garrison that groups of Service personnel are still singing joyfully to express their mutual hostility.

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Notes

1. The military term "posting" refers to the activity by the MOD of moving an individual from one post to another (usually in a different place) as a normal part of career progression. In the Royal Navy the term is "drafting".
2. All names of people and locations have been changed, and no specific dates are given for the incidents described in this paper, to prevent identification of those involved. The main issue is the social interaction observed rather than who did and said what.
3. The term "emergency tour" was current in the 1980s and earlier to delineate a short tour of deployed duty lasting months rather than years. The word "emergency" does not necessarily imply that there was any conflict in the area to which military personnel were deployed, but that it remained a possibility. A force created in this way might be engaged in combat or might just as well be constituted as a deterrent or even simply as evidence of UK national interest. In this case, Carvenblor was deemed to be an area at risk of possible incursion by another country, though none transpired.
4. A small number of the more senior officers were on six month tours. The most senior were on 12 month tours but lived separately in married quarters with their families and therefore did not participants in the events described.
5. Although the author was a serving military officer at the time of the events described, all the views, opinions, and analysis expressed in this paper are his own and do not reflect official opinion, policy or thought.
6. The warrant officers and sergeants' mess is usually referred to as 'the sergeants' mess' for brevity and this will be the pattern for this paper.
7. That is, as individuals without their families.
8. Catering facility comprising a canteen and cooking facilities.
9. The Royal Engineers were Army personnel with expertise and equipment to carry out airfield damage repair in case of attack. This is a standard role within the Royal Engineers and often involves working with the RAF, so RAF customs and practices were not arcane to these officers.
10. The "stable belt" is a webbing belt in the colours of the owner's Regiment or Corps and provides a ready means of affiliation for Army Officers. Uniquely in the Army, Guards officers wear their stable belts on the outside of their jumpers whether or not they are indoors or at their place of work.
11. The aircrew and engineers were recognized as closest to the people who had died, as the aircraft was being flown with a small number of engineers on board.
12. This phenomenon is not confined to the British Armed Services. See, for example Winslow (1999), where strong group identity that fits the model in Kirke (2009) is seen in the Canadian Armed forces.
13. This phenomenon, where individuals are bonded through sharing discomfort is common in Service life, may be relevant to the work of Paladino *et al.* (2010) on the effect of shared sensations in promoting perceptions of self-other similarity, an element of group bonding.
14. This concept is similar to, but not precisely the same as the "cultural lag" identified by William Ogburn (1957) Ogburn's main concern was with the delay between the availability of technical innovation and its acceptance by the people. The emphasis here is the delay between the imposition of change on a human group and its acceptance by the members of that group.
15. The analogy is with gyroscopes. A spinning gyroscope that is pushed in one direction actually moves in a different one. This process of resistance to directional movement is known as "precession".

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