

# Gendered Bodies for the 'Theatre of War'

Written by Synne Laastad Dyvik

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SYNNE LAASTAD DYVIK, NOV 20 2013

In the last twenty years, Western militaries have increasingly been recruiting from a wider pool of bodies and militaries are becoming more diverse, both in terms of gender, sexuality and racial and ethnic components. Corresponding to this, International Relations (IR) scholars are also beginning to take 'the body' as conceptually important when studying militarisation and warfare. The recent and on-going wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, under the doctrine of 'population-centric' counterinsurgency have been particularly interesting cases in terms of analysing the production of a variety of gendered soldier bodies and the various roles they play in war (Khalili 2010, Duncanson 2013, Dyvik 2013). Despite this variation, militaries endeavour to ensure relative conformity within the ranks and to discipline bodies in particular ways in order to ensure uniformity and unit cohesion. This happens through militarisation of bodies and paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir one might say that 'soldiers are not born, but made' (Woodward 2000: 640).

This article will touch upon some of the theoretical developments towards taking bodies, embodiment and experience seriously for the study of war and militarisation before it moves on to discuss an example of the detailed disciplining of male and female bodies in the US Army through the recently revised *Wear and Appearance Regulation* (AR 670-1). It argues that not only is the body central in understanding how modern militaries work, but that the production of particular notions of masculinity and femininity is central in understanding *what kinds of bodies are produced*. Analysing the revised edition of this document shows why taking bodies, and more specifically gendered bodies seriously when studying war and militarisation is important as it provides us with a deeper understanding of the hard gendered work that is involved in producing soldier bodies fit for 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare.

### War, Militarisation and Embodiment

Understanding soldier bodies as produced is not particularly new. For Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, the modern military served as a central example of how the body is malleable and 'pliable', and how military discipline creates an 'automatism of habit' (Foucault 1991: 135). Feminists have for years been pointing out how central gender and sexuality is to understanding how the state fashions its forces and how the production of soldier bodies and the production of gender is oftentimes a mutually constitutive process (see among many more Elshtain 1987, Enloe 2000, Hockey 2003, Whitworth 2004, Woodward and Winter 2007, Bulmer 2013).

In traditional IR approaches to war and militarism, however, bodies and embodied experience has largely been ignored. On the one hand, this can partly be explained in the way that bodies have always been relatively distant from political thought and the challenges of conceptualising the body as a relevant political variable. While bodies are everywhere in politics and IR, the body remains the most visible and invisible component of politics (Coole 2007: 413 see also , Jabri 2006). On the other hand, one might say that developments in military and strategic policy have themselves encouraged this 'disembodied' focus, for instance through the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) during the 1990s. The first Gulf War, with its excessive focus on technology, communications and 'surgical strikes' seemed to seek to remove the human body from war altogether, something that was merely exacerbated by the US military not publishing body counts (McSorley 2013: 5).

Recently however, more academic attention is being placed on the centrality of embodiment and experience of how we understand war and militarism (see among others Sylvester 2012, McSorley 2013, Basham 2013, Sylvester

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2013). These approaches recognize that bodies are not, as in Cartesian dualism, neutral vessels for the mind, a conception that has historically left women with little of the mind and all the body. Bodies are not ahistorical, biologically given and a-cultural (Grosz 1994: 18), nor are they devoid of gender and race. Rather, as Foucault argues, they are subject to power relations that invest in them, mark them and bring them into being as they are 'directly involved in the political field' (1991: 25). Bodies can be 'inscribed with a range of political and ideological ideals that form a connection between meaning and knowing, between symbolism and reality' (Maltby and Thornham 2012: 37). However, this is not to say that technology is ignored in this approach to studying militarisation and war. Rather, increased attention is placed on the relationship between bodies and technology and how this challenges our perceptions of both (Masters 2010, Marlin-Bennett 2013, Protevi 2013).

In addition to the theoretical developments discussed above, it is worth noting that the types of wars fought in recent years by Western forces arguably require very particular bodies and a range of femininities and masculinities, such as those that made up the Female Engagement Teams (FETs) in Afghanistan. Herein, women's bodies are deemed particularly useful for the practice of 'population-centric' counterinsurgency in that they are expected to have a unique access to local Afghan women's lives and experiences (McBride and Wibben 2012, Dyvik 2013). These types of teams, made up solely of female soldier bodies with the purpose to access other female bodies (Afghan women) for information and as a part of the effort to 'win hearts and minds' speaks to the centrality of bodies in 21<sup>st</sup> century counterinsurgency. This type of warfare, with its intimate, personal and bio-political practices is therefore a significant development on from RMD, through continuities between the two clearly exist (McSorley 2013: 10). Nevertheless, this type of warfare is one where the body politics of a given 'theatre of war' becomes a target in its own right through a type of warfare intent on transformation (Anderson 2011, Kienscherf 2011, Feichtinger et al. 2012).

## Fashioning an Army

When studying the production of militarised martial bodies, it is often the seemingly trivial and everyday that become important (Basham 2008). In the last two years, SMA Raymond F. Chandler III, among others, has been in the process of reforming the US Army's *Wear and Appearance of Army Uniforms and Insignia Regulation* (AR 670-1). This recent edition of the regulation involves a rigorous tightening up of rules regarding personal appearance and is due to be enforced in 2014. One of the important changes overall is the way that the regulations extend not only to soldiers on-duty, but also off-duty and with the regulations being increasingly tight, this has solicited a great deal of attention from both the media and the troops (Army Times 2012b).

The 357 page long document, complete with detailed sketches and figures has been put in place because 'a neat and well-groomed appearance by all soldiers is fundamental to the Army and contributes to building the pride and esprit essential to an effective military force' (US Army 2012: 2). The importance of looking 'neat and well-groomed' is neither particularly new, nor is it unique to the US Army. Rather, militaries have for a long time nurtured particular aesthetics such as being clean-shaven (or have an appropriately trimmed beard), having properly pressed or ironed shirts and shoes polished to a high standard; all of which become symbolic of an individual's soldier's degree of dedication and discipline, both to his or hers *individual* militarized body, and as a part of a *collective* militarized body (Newlands 2013, Greenwood 2013). In other words, what is at stake here is twofold – on the one hand it is about producing particular martial bodies suitable for an army, and on the other hand, it is about ensuring that the army functions as a collective unit. And it is this tension between the individual and the collective body that feeds antagonisms when these new regulations are put in place.

As mentioned, the new regulation has attracted much attention, particularly tightening up the appearance of tattoos (Army Times 2012a, Army Times 2012b, Smith 2013, NPR 2013). Tattoos on the 'head, face, or neck and above class A uniform collar are prohibited' according to the new standard, and any tattoo that is 'extremist, indecent, sexist, or racist are prohibited regardless of location on the body' (US Army 2012: 6). Historically of course, and increasingly since WWII, servicemen have been good customers for tattoo parlors and popular images include patriotic tattoos, commemorations of particular battles, military insignias and memorials of fallen fellow soldiers (DeMello 2000)[1]. Tattoos therefore often symbolize something deeply personal for many soldiers and it is not necessarily surprising that this change has garnered a great deal of criticism. The new rules might be 'grandfathered in' for current soldiers, but the rules will also require them to have any tattoos deemed sexist, racist or extremist

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removed, a treatment that is both costly, painful and time consuming.

On his Facebook page, SMA Chandler has since 2011 been asking for suggestions and reactions to the changes, in particular those of Chapter 1[2], citing 'earrings for females, French tipped nail polish and tattoos' as of particular concern. Since September 2011 his call for input has (per November 2013) received no less than 1384 comments (SMA Raymond F. Chandler 2011). The suggestions and reactions are quite diverse, from anger at the proposed changes, to feelings that it is about time things are 'tightened up', from a sense that the US has other things to worry about, to a feeling that it's good that these things are clarified both for commanders and soldiers. One comment on SMA Chandler's webpage, which received a comparatively high amount of 'likes' states that 'the question is this: Would you rather lose a huge proportion of the experienced NCO corps that was tattooed during their enlistment and see a bunch of "pretty-boy yes men" take their places?' (SMA Raymond F. Chandler 2011). Several blogs and web pages for the US military and soldiers, such as *Stars and Stripes* and *ArmyTimes* have dedicated several articles to the topic. The latter reports that most troops are against the changes and the magazine has received more than a hundred angry letters in response to them (Army Times 2012b). Several soldiers are asking questions such as 'why these tattooed troops were good enough for war, but not for the new Army?' (Army Times 2012b).

However, these changes have not come out of the blue and are influenced by the recent history of US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While regulations on tattoos have always been in place, these were, along with other criteria, loosened in 2006 as the Army was in need of more bodies to accommodate the surge in Iraq in particular (Badkhen 2006, NPR 2013). As these wars are now drawing to a close, it also signals an opportunity and perhaps even a necessity for the US Army to scale down and tighten the kinds of bodies it recruits. As one soldier comments – the standards and discipline of the US Army has 'gone out the window during the surge' and that it is now time to get back to standards (SMA Raymond F. Chandler 2011). Others note that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan enabled the US to develop the 'most competent tactical leaders, ones with full sleeves, minor criminal records and the piss and vinegar needed to win wars. Now I guess we are just "shitbags" because we grow sideburns, have sleeve tattoos and all sorts of other non important crap' (Smith 2013). Needless to say, there is likely a relatively large group of soldiers who have volunteered since 9/11 that now feel they are no longer wanted or needed. In response to criticism, SMA Chandler has reminded soldiers that 'You chose to join the Army, the Army didn't choose to join you' (Army Times 2012a).

## Feminine and Masculine Martial Bodies

As already discussed, the US Army with this new and tightened up policy clearly places a great deal of effort on 'looking the part' and regulating the aesthetics of 'the soldier body'. In this creative space, women's bodies pose particular problems for the military. As Cynthia Enloe has shown, women's entry into the armed forces posed a whole range of new challenges for the military and whether or not female soldiers should wear high heels and have breast pockets on their shirts were deemed important questions (2000: 261-273). Related concerns are present in the AR 270-1 as well.

While much of the ethos behind these regulations are about ensuring uniformity (i.e. looking the same/similar) and instilling particular notions of discipline that are immediately visible, the document includes a range of regulations that ensure that the femininity and masculinity of women's and men's bodies are governed in particular ways. For example, male soldiers are now not allowed to have long hair, wear cosmetics or nail polish. To what extent this has been 'an issue' is unclear, though it is worth noting that the US Army now finds it necessary to ban nail polish and make up from male bodies. This is interesting not only because women are allowed to (and that this in and of itself tells us something about regulations of male and female bodies), but also because *how* this is regulated for women speaks to a particular kind of female soldier produced. Any use of nail polish or cosmetics worn by females must be 'conservative' and not only 'complement the uniform', but also 'their complexion' (US Army 2012: 5). Prohibited nail polish colours include (but are not limited to) purple, gold, black, blue, white, bright red, khaki, camouflage or fluorescent colours (ibid.). While the US Army might not be particularly concerned with fashion per se (more likely it is the other way around),[3] more than one fashion expert might suggest that a khaki or camouflage coloured nail polish might just complement some uniforms. Regardless, what is more interesting here is the stipulation about cosmetics complementing a female soldier's complexion. If women in the US Army chose to wear make up, the sanctioned

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options ultimately need to be aesthetically pleasing to their superior officers.

The use of nail polish and earrings are also frequently discussed on SMA Chandler's Facebook page. Several comments compare the Army to for instance the Marine Corps or the Air Force (AR). The Marine Corps is in one comment held up as the standard as 'they are always squared and standing tall', whereas several mention how the use of earrings in the AR by female pilots is problematic and 'distracting'. However, reactions to this vary. One states that 'as a female I think earrings enhance the femininity of females in uniform' and that this is positive and should be allowed, while another female soldier claims that 'this is the US Army and there's no time for "pretty" here' (SMA Raymond F. Chandler 2011). One commentator identifying herself as an African-American female soldier states that 'we should NOT have to change ourselves to fight for our country. Many people come to the US because we're free to be ourselves' (SMA Raymond F. Chandler 2011).

Equally, regulations regarding female soldier's hair are also detailed. Females cannot, unlike men, have shaved hair (US Army 2012: 4). Also, any use of what the US Army calls 'hair holding devices' is heavily regulated and they must not be used for 'decorative purposes' (US Army 2012: 5). Prohibited examples include, but again are not limited to 'large, lacy scrunchies; beads, bows, or claw clips; clips, pins, or barrettes with butterflies, flowers, sparkles, gems, or scalloped edges; and bows made from hairpieces' (ibid.). These regulations therefore encourage a particular production of femininity deemed suitable for a martial environment – suitably feminine (make up that matches one's complexion and no shaved hair), but nothing that can be deemed 'girly'.

## Conclusion

Through research on the US Navy, Frank J. Barrett argues that while women are subject to many of the same tests and strains of training and deployment, they face different kinds of negotiations. He argues that 'women face a core contradiction in this culture: the more that men witness women successfully "doing masculinity", the more they are vulnerable to charges of lesbianism... but if they chose to conform with the traditional images of femininity, they can risk going too far in this endeavour as well' (Barrett 2002: 171-172). Similar embodied negotiations are present in the new US Army regulations as well. The new regulations are not only about ensuring relative uniformity, unit cohesion, aesthetic or discipline. They are also about promoting and producing particular kinds of approved femininities and masculinities fit for service. They show some of the level of detail that goes into producing 'the martial body' and how imbued these bodies are with particular sanctioned forms of sexuality and gender.

The new regulations and the reactions to it speak to a series of tensions. One is between the individual and the collective soldier body, particularly visible in the debates around tattoos. The gender specific regulations on cosmetics, hair and nail polish show tensions between femininities and masculinities and how these need to be managed and disciplined. However, they also show a tension between the need for a certain number of bodies and a certain kind of body through the timing of this regulation. In all instances, the bodies do form a connection between 'meaning and knowing', the symbolic and the real (Maltby and Thornham 2012: 37) and show how studying the disciplining of martial bodies tells us a great deal about the relationship between gender, sexuality, militarisation and warfare. As is clear, fashioning an army fit for 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare is indeed hard gendered work.

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[1] Interestingly, tattoos deemed to be 'indecent' have been prohibited for a long time in the US military, something that led to naked women tattoos being covered up by another tattoo (DeMello 2000: 51), sparking the trend of 'sexy nurse' tattoos (Dallett 2013). For a selection of photos of Afghan and Iraq veteran's tattoos, please see <http://lightbox.time.com/2011/11/11/the-art-of-war-honoring-the-fallen-for-a-lifetime/#end>

[2] Chapter 1 of AR 670-1 deals in particular with 'personal appearance', including hair, fingernails, make-up and eyewear to name a few.

[3] For an example of how the fashion industry has made use of the military and war, see the following collection of images from *Vogue Italia's* feature 'Make Love, Not War' from September 2007 <http://www.mymodernmet.com/profiles/blogs/make-love-not-war-steven>. See also (Tynan 2013)

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## About the author:

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