Warrior Networks:

Elite Soldiers

and their Transition to Civilian Life

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Dedication

To all of those that have gone before me, the gallant warriors of the past, who paved the way with their selflessness and sacrifice; to all of those of you that continue to serve, the indomitable spirits among us, the present-day guardians of liberty; and of course, to the future warriors who will take up the mantle of service, your journey is yet unwritten, but your potential is boundless. May you all inherit the wisdom of those who came before you, tempered by the lessons of history.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to outline my gratitude to several people who have and will continue to play a momentous part in my life. Undertaking this PhD would not have been possible without the support of my family, especially my brother and sister, and my friends. In particular, I want to thank my wife and brother who pushed me, and believed in me, encouraging me to begin my journey through third-level education, my mother and father for giving me an opportunity to be me, and my daughter for grounding me and just being her.

To my supervisor, mentor and friend Professor Mark Maguire, without your guidance, insight, mentoring and countless hours of effort none of this would have been possible. To Maynooth University, the Department of Anthropology and the John and Pat Hume Scholarship program, thank you for taking a chance on a very non-typical candidate and allowing me the opportunity to undertake this research. And finally, to the military for allowing me to continue in the footsteps of those that have gone before, to experience what I have, make the friends that I did and to come out the other side a better person.

Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore the transition of Special Forces soldiers from elite military units to civilian life. There is a large social-scientific literature on transition, which emphasises adjustment challenges and negative outcomes for mental health and violence. But what factors determine successful transition? A number of recent studies conclude that successful transition is a matter of "cultural competences," but the term culture is deployed without analytical precision. Moreover, other social-scientific studies worry about the excessive power of "culture" in the form of informal networks and guilds, which may well be the source of the competences that lead to success. The scholarly discussion about transition from military to civilian life, then, is dominated by anthropological concerns and disciplinary concepts – most obviously culture and its synonyms – but no reference is made to anthropological theory or to ethnographic research.

This research is an anthropological exploration of the cultural space between the military and civil society. It is grounded in an ethnographic study that tracks the transition of individuals from a comparative sample of key military units. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, the focus is on military-civil fields, on habitus, and on capital, in order to develop a more nuanced, anthropological understanding of "cultural competence". The project also makes an empirical contribution by focusing on the understudied world of elite Special Forces. As yet, there has been no in-depth study of the transition of soldiers from this elite and high-stakes world to civilian roles. Over the lifetime of this project, I will follow the transition of individuals from several units, focusing on field, habitus and capital, to provide an anthropological perspective on military-civil transition.

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Introduction

The first few days and weeks as a recruit are lived in a whirlwind of activity and emotion. Everything is done at double speed—including eating and sleeping—and you live alienated from your body, looking through other eyes, unable to process experience. Yet, "in reality," you are passing through a structured program as just one recruit among many. You are surrounded by people on a similar journey who speak with different accents, personalities, and stories. The others are friends and competitors, some of whom will not pass and never earn the coveted beret and wings. You are constantly judged, as we were one morning by a Non-commissioned Officer (NCO) named Smith, a mountain of a man with deep-set eyes and a creased face finished with an impressive moustache. Corporal Smith screamed drill instructions at us for some time. "Look away!" he sometimes screamed at a recruit. NCOs, for some unknown reason, often take issue with recruits "eyeballing" them. I made that mistake and was duly punched in the solar plexus. I dropped to my knees, the wind knocked out of my lungs, pain shooting from the point of impact. My eyes closed, I heard the same punishment being dished out to other soldiers to my left and right. Bewildered, we tried to stand up. "Who are you eyeballing?" I still find it hard to make eye contact with people to this day.

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I had been out of the military for years, yet here I was, a soldier again. My job in 2013 was to protect high-value clients for a global corporation. My client that day was trapped in a shopping complex that was under attack by several terrorists. Along with other ex-Special Forces operators, I made it to the mall's rooftop carpark, a scene of indescribable death and destruction, blood, gore, and soft crying. "This is what we train for." We formulated a plan and secured the client. But what about all the survivors? We had to rescue them too, because we could, a strange responsibility. How do you convince someone to trust you, a stranger, and take your hand, someone who has just seen human beings just like them murder children, perhaps one of their own. Well, you must look deep into their eyes and allow them to look back and see your soul. You can break the spell cast by the horrifying open mouth of chaos by revealing yourself as a fellow human being. So, ... I found myself looking into people's eyes. I find it hard to make eye contact with people (Author's various recollections, 2024).

This research explores the transition of Special Forces soldiers from elite military units to the civilian world. I have drawn the above vignettes from my own life experience, which motivated me to embark on this project. This motivation increased upon discovering that there were just a few anthropological studies of transition, and little social-scientific research on Special Forces. Therefore, this research would contribute to a significant and understudied topic, bringing anthropological insights, sensibilities, and in-depth human-centric research.

I joined the military as a teenage soldier and immediately entered the selection process for an elite unit of the British armed forces, the Parachute Regiment. The Regiment runs a pre-selection course called the Parachute Regiment Aptitude Course or (PRAC). This course may be undertaken after completion of all other aspects of army enlistment, such as regular fitness tests, followed by testing for the traditional elite units of the United Kingdom known as the Guards Regiments. This is then followed by the longest training in the British army and compounded with another selection course that is undertaken at week twenty-one of initial training, which is called P Company or Pegasus Company, where the average yearly pass rate sits at about 30 to 40% of the already pre-screened applicants. P Company is a notoriously gruelling course which is both physically and mentally demanding and includes a high-level assault course, the gruelling log-carry, the steeple chase, and stretcher race, multiple loaded speed and endurance marches over various distances, and a brutal form of boxing called "milling" synonymous with the Parachute Regiment.

The separation, physicality, violence, and desire to succeed in group membership, signalled by wearing the group's colours, all of this made me, as a young man, intuitively interested in anthropological themes, even if I was not formally educated about them. Since its formal origin as an academic subject, anthropology has been interested in how processes such as rituals, rites, and trials, mark the transition of someone to a new status and into group membership. Famously, Arnold Van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* (1961) begins by describing society as composed of separate rooms with passages connecting them. The military, especially the secret world of elite forces, seems to be a striking example

of this, with the passage to the outside notably understudied. But there is more to the story, and more to anthropological insights, than classic studies of rites and rituals.

Unsurprisingly, with its rigorous selection process, the Parachute Regiment is renowned as a funnel for potential United Kingdom Special Forces operators. "Paras" compose around 60% of soldiers serving with United Kingdom Special Forces. I chose this entry path into the professional military with great care and consideration. Firstly, I am an Irish national born and raised mainly in Dublin. Secondly, there is no denying that the Parachute Regiment is held in contempt and disdain by Irish people both North as well as South of the border. However, outside of Ireland, the Regiment is held in very high regard for its toughness, elitism, failure rate and its many battle honours won through its short history. I chose this path with all of this in mind and with the knowledge that for me at least, failure was not an option. During the period that I was enlisted in the armed forces, the killings of Catholic British Army soldiers and police officers, as well as so-called punishment beatings, were a regular occurrence and a real possibility. In the Paras, I was an insider and an outsider—the resonance with anthropology, especially the ethnographer, is now striking.

Having then passed selection and served within the ranks of this elite regiment I was exposed to the world of Special Forces, a world to even serving soldiers in other elite units such as the Parachute Regiment that is still to a large extent a mystery, a daunting challenge and a somewhat faraway place of secrets and whispers.

I was later myself unfortunately forced to make a decision to either stay in the UK and cut off all connections to my past life in Ireland or to resign and return to Ireland and join the Irish Defence Forces. This was a decision made with consideration for my family living in Ireland and the negative impact that my career choice was having on their lives. My decision to join the Irish Defence Forces coincided with the fact that I would escape a punishment beating or worse as a member of the Defence Forces but left me at odds with typical career progression lines within an organisation that was only loosely structured on the British Army. I was now also faced with another challenge that of being a traitor in the eyes of many members and across all ranks of the Defence Forces. I decided from the outset that I would elect to apply for the Special Forces and that I would give myself no other option but to pass or to leave and follow another path outside of Ireland.

Selection for the Army Ranger Wing is as tough as it gets in comparison to any other Special Forces unit and in some respects harder. At the time that I undertook selection the unit was in the process of developing a standardised modular Special Forces course with our allies. My course, however, was one of the last of the old type, where extreme food and sleep deprivation were expected.

Upon completion, I became one of the selected few to grace its ranks. After a number of years with the unit, and service overseas, I made the decision to move to the private sector, a very difficult undertaking and transition at that time. This was a time when personal contacts and recommendation got you a job, and a time when a former Special Forces operator's CV could not be shared. During my transition, I was fortunate to only experience minor setbacks stemming mainly

from a personal lack of self-belief and having to reinvent myself with a focus away from what I understood to be a more private sector-facing approach. This also took place during a time of global upheaval that allowed me to establish myself early on in numerous international companies, as well as through shared experiences with other colleagues who served in numerous other Special Forces units. In these early days networks became paramount as hiring remained on a recommendation basis. Many of these men, myself included, then transitioned into senior management positions in global organisations and some like myself have transitioned to other fields. But how common was my experience, and the experience of the people I knew well? Some certainly struggled. The barriers to successful integration in the civilian world are high—imagine not being able to share your CV, having world-class skills that are deemed unacceptable to discuss, having to reshape your mindset and your body to a very different world. It is clear to me, that the transition of Special Forces is a special topic to which I have unique access.

As stated, this research is an anthropological exploration of the cultural space between the military and civil society. It is grounded in an ethnographic study—shaped here by recorded interviews—that tracks the transition of individuals from a comparative sample of key military units. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, the focus is on military-civil fields (where competition is evident), habitus, and various forms of capital to develop a more nuanced, anthropological understanding of the "cultural competence" in transitions.

Of course, there is a sizeable social-scientific literature on transition, which emphasizes adjustment challenges and adverse outcomes for mental health and

violence. However, what factors determine successful transition? Several recent studies conclude that successful transition is a matter of "cultural competencies," but the term culture is deployed without analytical precision. Moreover, other social-scientific studies worry about the excessive power of "culture" in the form of informal networks and guilds, which may well be the source of the competencies that lead to success. The scholarly discussion about the transition from military to civilian life, then, is dominated by anthropological concerns and disciplinary concepts—most obviously culture and its synonyms, though, ironically, the term "culture" is now treated with disciplinary caution—but no reference is made to anthropological theory or ethnographic research. This thesis addresses all of this.

Focusing on Special Forces

In 2021, the US military "completed" a shambolic withdrawal from Kabul, leaving behind $8 billion worth of weapons, allies, friends, "blood and treasure," and its reputation. The so-called forever war in Afghanistan was shaped from the start by the deployment of Special Operators. During the first weeks, Green Berets and their Northern Alliance allies toppled the Taliban on horseback. From then on, rotation after rotation of operators trained allies, fought the Taliban, sometimes successfully. Some operators went back multiple times, in their 40s, to "finish the job." An operator speaking to writer Brian Castner (2017) captured the extent of service: "There are some 40-year-old sled dogs that Uncle Sam has been relying on since 9/11: They'll pull and they'll pull till their hearts explode." Mark Bowden (2021), author of *Black Hawk Down*, gives this summary:

Within the span of a few decades, the United States has utterly transformed its military, or at least the military that is actively fighting. This has taken place with little fanfare and little public scrutiny. … Big ships, strategic bombers, nuclear submarines, flaring missiles, mass armies—these still represent the conventional imagery of American power, and they absorb about 98 percent of the Pentagon's budget. Special Ops forces, in contrast, are astonishingly small. And yet they are now responsible for much of the military's on-the-ground engagement in real or potential trouble spots around the world. … It happened out of necessity. We now live in an open-ended world of "competition short of conflict," to use a phrase from military doctrine. …Using conventional forces is like wielding a sledgehammer. Special Ops forces are more like a Swiss Army knife. Over the years, the U.S. has found out just how versatile that knife can be; the flexibility and competence of Special Ops have proved invaluable. At the same time, the insularity and elitism of these units have bred a culture with elements that some of their own leaders, to their credit, have described as troubling, and that have, in certain instances, evidenced contempt for the traditional values of America's armed forces. Much of the action takes place in secret. Most Americans are unaware that it has been active in a country until the announcement that its forces are being withdrawn (Bowden 2021: 39; see also Lutz 2001).

Bowden's summary needs revision. Indeed, Special Forces comprise less than five percent of US military personnel yet are now vital to all major conflicts, often in secret. Entire forms of war are now synonymous with Special Forces, "hybrid," "unconventional," and especially "deep" wars. "We're the dark matter … the force that orders the universe but can't be seen," a Navy SEAL told *Washington Post* journalists (Priest and Arkan 2011: 17). However, reflecting on the War in Ukraine, Maguire and Westbrook (2023) argue that "security" came to prominence in post-9-11 geopolitics in part as a response to specific enemies, but also as a response to peace. Terrorism requires specialist counterterror police and forces; the military relied on outside "contractors;" secrecy and expert distance increased. The gulf between the professionals and the public widened. Maguire and Westbrook quote the Greek orator Aristides's description of life under *Pax Romana*:

> Wars, even if they once occurred, no longer seem real; on the contrary, stories about them are interpreted more as myths by the many who hear them. If anywhere an actual clash occurs along the border, as is only natural in the immensity of a great empire, because of the madness of the Getae or the misfortune of the Libyans or the wickedness of those around the Red Sea, who are unable to enjoy the blessings they have, then simply like myths, they themselves quickly pass and the stories about them (2023: 44).

On the surface, the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, shattered the professional pax and changed history, reverting it to trench warfare, tank battles, the bombing of civilians in cities, and mass casualties from shelling. Nevertheless, special operations remain central to warfighting. In the first week of the invasion, a 40-mile Russian convoy (traffic jam) outside Kyiv was decimated by Special Forces attacks mounted at night on electric motorbikes. Six months later, Ukraine retook the north-eastern Kharkiv Oblast, spearheaded by operators using repurposed "Mad Max" technical vehicles. Furthermore, western operators are on the ground, assisting, overseeing, and watching, while former operators assist with rescue efforts and protecting various "assets."

Of course, as I will show in Chapter 1, the use of Special Forces is not new. Rome had its Praetorians, Byzantium had the Varangians, and the Ottomans had their Janissaries. In the nineteenth century, British imperialism advanced through hybrid and unconventional action, and used the military recourses of empire, such as the Gurkha Rifles and Irish regiments to great effect. The US and its adversaries pursued their Cold War agenda using irregular means, captured under the rubric of "counterinsurgency," and often using elite forces. Today, the US Special Operations Command's (SOCOM) new *Vision and Strategy,* elite forces are imagined as central to the future of war.

As Special Forces have become more central to warfighting, they have also become stables of popular culture. Films such *American Sniper, Lone Survivor,* and *13 Hours* and TV series like *The Terminal List* and *SAS: Who Dares Wins* attract massive audiences, and memoirs and podcasts seem to be everywhere. This has given us a cartoon operator, alternately invincible and shattered, often

incapable of doing anything other than what they were trained to do, sometimes trying to return to the ring like an aging prize-fighter. The operator is a cultural figure, celebrated by the nation-state, but also a potential threat, a weapon that must be secured by society, dangerous even in age.

Drive, ambition, teamwork, and self-motivation are synonymous with Special Forces. These skills have been honed and developed over years of personal development and continuous learning. But can skills like these be applied when undertaking the transition to the private sector? All Special Forces service leavers face the issue of breaking the shroud of anonymity that they have grown so accustomed to when a member of their respective unit. To further compound this issue, you now have the common practice of operators having signed official secrets acts from their respective country.

Secrecy has an enormous impact on a CV, and it is not easy to convert your life experiences, expertise and knowledge gained up to the point of leaving into a format that is understandable, relevant, and acknowledged by companies, organisations, and recruiters. In a process with "affordances" and obstacles, what options are available to the soon-to-be former Special Forces operator? How has the operator prepared himself mentally and educationally? What route will they choose? Will they follow the natural post-service stream and gravitate to a Private Military Company (PMC) or to the private security sector, which sometimes are seen as the path of least resistance? This is one of the questions that raises the theme of "networks," a topic I will discuss in the concluding chapters, but it also emerges at several other points throughout this thesis.

Transition

This thesis explores Special Forces soldiers' transition from elite military units to civilian life. "Transition" is defined as "the period of reintegration into civilian life from the military and encapsulates the process of change that a service person necessarily undertakes when her or his military career comes to an end" (Cooper et al 2018: 157). There is a sizeable social-scientific literature on transition, discussed here, which emphasizes adjustment challenges and adverse outcomes for mental health and violence. However, so far, little attention has been paid to factors that determine successful transition. Several recent studies conclude that successful transition is a matter of "cultural competencies," but the term culture is deployed without analytical precision.

Moreover, other social-scientific studies worry about the excessive power of "culture" in the form of informal networks and guilds, which may well be the source of the competencies that lead to success. The scholarly discussion about the transition from military to civilian life, then, is dominated by anthropological concerns and disciplinary concepts – most obviously culture and its synonyms – but no reference is made to anthropological theory or ethnographic research. Here, I synthesize this literature to explain the scholarly contribution that my research will make.

Military-Civilian Transition

The extensive social-scientific literature on the military-to-civilian life transition emphasizes adjustment challenges and adverse societal outcomes, such as trauma (PTSD), severe mental health problems, substance abuse, crime, and domestic

violence (e.g., Higate 2001; Comacho & Atwood, 2007; Bergman et al. 2014; Cooper et al., 2016). An interesting example is provided by James McDermott's Old Soldiers Never Die (McDermott 2007), which studied the transition of regular soldiers, sailors, and airmen after they completed an entire military contract of at least twenty-two years in the British Army and after that successfully undertook a transition to the private sector utilizing and adapting the skills that they had gained and honed throughout their military contracts. Much of this research concerns veterans in societies with large and active militaries, such as the United States and Canada, and European countries, such as the United Kingdom. It is not difficult to see why these topics are matters of concern. Nation-states have unique cultural and symbolic responsibility for veterans, and the transition from contexts where the organized use of force is regular to civilian contexts where safety is expected as normal distinguishes military to civilian life transition from other transitions, say university student to public employee, civil servant to private sector worker, etc. Therefore, because of the uniqueness of the level of responsibility involved, the sharpness of the transition, and the dangers of adverse reactions, societies are concerned with evidence of adverse outcomes. Former military staff members are likely to experience problems such as trauma, risk of homelessness, substance abuse, crime, and domestic violence. Commenting on just the issue of mental health, especially suicide risk, Holliday et al. note,

> Within the United States (U.S.), suicide remains a significant public health concern, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently reporting it as the tenth overall leading cause of death. Risk for

suicide is especially pronounced among U.S. military personnel and

veterans, among whom adjusted suicide rates have, at times, outpaced

suicide rates in the general U.S. non-veteran adult population. As such,

preventing suicide among military personnel and veterans remains a top

clinical priority of the Departments of Defence and VA (2020: 2).

Risks such as the above are attributed to a variety of factors, from PTSD arising

from battlefield experience to the closed fraternity culture of military service (see

Camacho and Atwood 2007). But what factors are at play in most cases that result

in successful transition? Recent studies argue that we must pay attention to

transition as a "cultural" matter of "competences" (see Cooper et al 2016).

Bergman, Burdett, and Greenberg (2014) describe transition as ''reverse culture

shock'' and grant this process huge importance. But what is meant by culture in

this new wave of research? According to Cooper et al (2016: 158-9),

> Contemporary social theory has yet to fully consider how culture and
>
> cultural practices may persist when a service person transfers to a different
>
> social context, and conversely, how cultural adaptation may take place. …
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> Scholarship within military sociology has explored varied aspects of
>
> military culture including the processes by which recruits are socialized
>
> into it, the gender ideologies which sustain it, and the influence that culture
>
> has on the identity formation of previously familiar environment. … the
>
> transformation that civilians go through when becoming a member of the
>
> Armed Forces. Through the process of basic training, new recruits enter a

forced ''separation'' from civilian life to make way for a strong identification with the military organization and culture.

The socialization of the recruit into military culture has been studied for some time, but the study of transition, which is equally cultural, is less well understood. Cooper et al (2016) describe it as a "priority" in the research literature. Cooper et al explain that for veterans to have successful transitions they must "creatively adapt their behaviours to develop cultural competence in civilian life" (2016: 163).

Clearly, "culture" is doing much analytical work here. However, another strand of social science worries about military culture and its persistence in civilian life, studies that point to the excessive power of informal networks and guilds and the dangers they pose to democracy (e.g. Bigo 2014; Masco 2014; Dower 2011). Drawing on her long-term and large-scale anthropological project with Danish veterans, Sørensen (2015) describes the return of Danish soldiers from international operations to unsettling "homecomings." "The certainty previously provided the soldier by rank, function, and mission vanishes," and new "social identities" must be forged. She goes on,

> While the outcome of negotiations of identity is never predictable, the stakes are exceptionally high for people who—like the veterans—are embedded in morally contentious fields, something that makes issues of secrecy, disclosure, concealment, silence, and deception particularly pronounced in storytelling. … Rather than being a rite de passage, home-

coming events mark the beginning of an extended homecoming process with ongoing struggles for veterans to find them-selves and their place in the civilian social world. Conventional understandings of homecoming as reintegration into a familiar world, maybe aided by treatment, rehabilitation, and re-qualification, fail to capture this search for new social existences and the consideration of and experimentation with different possible identities (Sørensen 2015: s234).

For all troops deployed, there will always be the daily battle with the restrictions surrounded by deployment, such as the loss of one's individuality, dealing with the periods of sometimes extreme boredom, the lack of essential commodities, necessities, and personal space, undertaking repetitive, tedious tasks and loneliness through to the other extremes of just staying alive and surviving the next patrol or indeed the following number of hours or the next inevitable enemy attack on your position, not to mention the nagging fear from the exposure to IED's and the very high likelihood of becoming a casualty or even possibly becoming permanently disabled and a burden to one's family for the remainder of their lives or, however unlikely, the potential of being captured by the enemy and all the possible scenarios that can and have been played out and reported in the media from such an eventuality. If we now take these issues and challenges and further compound them with other potential issues that arise in normal circumstances, such as family and relationship issues, financial problems, the list goes on. These, then, are the genuine daily issues and concerns that confront the

deployed soldier and are challenges that are worlds away from the concerns of his or her peers back in society.

Having thought of the extreme nature of transition for a soldier, now we must consider a Special Forces operator. They will have been exposed to extreme levels of stress, violence, and fear not experienced or encountered in two entire lifetimes for most ordinary people. These experiences are sometimes lived for days, weeks, and even months at a time.

We must also consider public reactions to military life. Soldiers returning from WWII did so as heroes and suffered difficult transitions; soldiers returning from Vietnam or the Gulf Wars had difficult transitions but also encountered a hostile public; special operators did not get homecomings at all. However, public views are often rigid, either overly celebratory, turning public servants into demigods, or overly harsh, seeing soldiers as inhuman instruments of war. In this thesis, I focus on field, habitus, and capital and use lengthy quotations from the recollections of operators to humanize people and give them flesh and blood. One of the virtues of this research is that it contributes to a critical intellectual and policy issue in a humanistic way.

Studying the Culture of Transition

The contribution of this research to social theory is in the form of its ethnographic engagement with the work of Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., Bourdieu 1986; Grenfell 2013). The military is often read as a powerful socialization machine that shapes individuals in a "total institution" (Goffman 1976), and, therefore, the transition from the military to civilian life can often be difficult—a "culture shock"—and

lead to significant negative societal consequences. Societies worry about military-civil transition as a potential social problem and a problem for the national imagination in terms of national narratives, heroic mythology, and cultural criticism embodied by failing veterans (see Dower 2011). (For example, some estimates suggest that one in ten members of the UK's prison population are former members of the armed forces). "Culture" in this literature is regarded as a source of value (see Cooper et al 2016) and an aid to transition and as a potential risk (e.g. Bigo 2014; Masco 2014; Dower 2011). To study the question of culture in military to civilian transition, we need to explore what culture means here.

In recent years, researchers have tried to provide further precision to notions of institutional culture by using a Bourdieu-inspired framework that emphasizes the differences between military and civil society "fields," the grounding of these differences in "habitus", and the different types of "capital" in these fields (Bourdieu 1986; see for a specific effort to explore military culture Cooper et al. 2016). However, this significant strand of research often concludes by pointing to "cultural competencies" and going no further. What do we mean by competencies here? And how are these scholars using the culture concept? Why is it that one literature points to "culture" and "networks" as a source of success while critical sociology worries about the power of informal "shadow" security networks (see Bigo 2014; Van Veeren 2019)? This research project makes a critical theoretical intervention by bringing anthropological understandings to the use of "culture" in other disciplines. The project follows Bourdieu by looking at fields, habitus, and capital, but it does so by bringing up-to-date anthropological insights. For example, Bourdieu's notion of habitus is reflected upon – drawing on

ethnographic data – using recent theoretical work on affect (e.g., Rutherford 2016; Wacquant 2006). His ideas of capital will also be discussed and challenged (Ortner 2006).

There are only a handful of in-depth studies of Special Forces, and only a few studies draw from ethnographic data (see Danielsen 2016). Therefore, as of right now, there has been no in-depth study of transition from this elite and high-stakes world. Special Forces are classed as, "Military activities conducted by specially designated, organised, selected, trained, and equipped forces using unconventional techniques and modes of employment" (Madeleine 2018: 4). They are small, highly trained, elite, secretive (Van Veeren 2019). To provide a breath of comparison, I undertook research with members of several units, but the formal interviews were relatively limited, so for exactness, I refer throughout to several detailed interactions, which I recorded with consent and confirmed with second interviews and make few claims beyond what is possible from the list below.

Figure 1: Research Participants by Unit, Country, Time Served, Location, Current and Previous Role, and Interconnectivity

UNIT	Country served	Time served	Current country	Current job	Previous jobs	Full time and/or reserve	Cross networking
SAS	UK	34	UK	Risk Manager for international O&G company	Close protection, military instructor	FT&R	3
SBS	UK	22	Kenya	Company owner	Corporate risk manager	FT	3
ARW	Ireland	26	Spain	Company owner	PMC security contractor, Close Protection	FT	7
ARW	Ireland	34	Ireland	United Nations	Military	FT	5
SBS	UK	10	UK	Security advisor television and movies	PMC security contractor, Close Protection, personal fitness instructor	FT	6
SAS	UK	7	NI	Consultant (Deceased)	PMC security contractor, Close Protection, window cleaner	Reserve	5
4 RHFS	France	30	France	Security consultant	Close protection, bar manager, sales rep	FT&R	6
4 RHFS	France	32	France	Security consultant	Close protection, building and construction	FT	5
ARW	Ireland	10	Spain	Company owner	PMC contractor, business owner, police officer, security consultant, foreign military trainer, private investigator	FT	16
2 Commando	Australia	15	S Africa	Risk Manager international NGO	NGO regional manager, foreign military trainer, aviation advisor	FT	3
1 RPIM	France	15	France	Risk Manager international software company	Close protection, risk manager, foreign military trainer	FT	4
ARW	Ireland	22	Ireland	Risk Manager television	PMC security contractor, close protection, television personality, author, motivational speaker	FT	7
ARW	Ireland	23	Ireland	Risk Manager UHNW family	Close protection, financial advisor, television personality, UHNW family protection liaison, motivational leader	FT	7
US Navy Seals	USA	12	USA	Foreign military trainer	PMC security contractor, business owner, foreign military trainer, inventor, government contractor	FT&R	3
ARW/1st SOFD-D	IRL/USA	35	USA	Media personality/instructor	PMC security contractor, author, instructor	FT	6

Figure 1: Research Participants by Unit, Country, Time Served, Location, Current and Previous Role, and Interconnectivity

Methods and ethical matters

The Special Forces community is shrouded in secrecy, with little information available beyond popular interviews and television shows loosely based on Hollywood's interpretation of what takes place. So, inevitably, within the Special Forces community, there is a high level of mistrust when discussing anything with outsiders. In many cases, the media portrays units and operators as one-dimensional characters covered with tattoos, bearded, angry, without a morsel of compassion, and killing machines that are seemingly unkillable.

History has shown us that the press, particularly the news media, is only interested in the sound bite. This, of course, is due to the difficulty in obtaining permissions and access to these units due to operational considerations. The typical report is often a half-baked story composed of half-truths liberally sprinkled with stock pictures of unit cap badges, wild accusations with unconfirmed sources, and slanderous statements. Nevertheless, it sells papers, books, news reports, and television shows.

Therefore, the challenge for the observer, or any outsider to the Special Forces community is the inaccessibility of their "culture" yet, at the same time, knowledge that a secret culture does exist beyond public view. Special Forces have an organizational culture with a military culture; they constitute a field within a field. It is a community unlike any other, which even other serving members of the same military organization do not fully grasp and understand. We can look at the first Gulf War in the early 1990s as a prime example of misunderstanding. General Norman Schwarzkopf (and indeed many senior officers of the time), the commander of all Allied forces during Operation Desert Storm, had a deep-rooted

mistrust of Special Operations stemming from his time in Vietnam. Interestingly, he was also a jump-qualified parachutist and Ranger-qualified soldier, with Rangers being predecessors to US Special Forces, and was, thereby, knowledgeable and informed about Special Operations. Nonetheless, he firmly believed in the more traditional deployment of military forces versus, in his opinion, the more maverick nature of Special Operations. This decision was primarily developed and informed around the type of combat expected in the upcoming conflict, standing armies, and major tank battles, with one side attaining air superiority early on. During Desert Storm, General Schwarzkopf's second in Command was General Sir Peter De La Billiere, KCB, KBE, DSO, MC & Bar, the commander of all British Special Forces in Iraq. This relationship swayed the deployment, and later, the use of Special Operations as a surgical asset to military commanders was embraced to significant effect. In short, the policy tug of war between senior command during Operation Desert Storm shows that even knowledgeable military commanders misunderstand the nature and role of special operators.

Secrecy invites the attribution of characteristics. Because Special Forces are not understood, and the mystery around their world is seductive, people project their desires and fears into the shadows. Perhaps Special Forces are God-like warriors, swords of justice, or perhaps they are a malevolent force, a weapon used by nefarious states. Of course, there have been scandals associated with Special Operations units. For example, though not Special Forces per se, one may recall the disbandment of the Canadian elite Airborne Regiment following an inquiry into several shocking incidents in Somalia in the 1990s. In brief, the Airborne troops

fought sporadically with local militia while attempting to preserve food supplies for a starving population. A siege mentality took over, and troops shot thieves. One food thief, a 16-year-old boy, was captured, tortured, and murdered. An official inquiry blamed a secretive and insular "culture" and a failure among senior commanders to establish a more professional operational culture. Here, we have the anthropological word again.

As this thesis will show, Special Forces units consciously cultivate a culture and competencies. This culture is capital. This culture binds ex-Forces together after the transition to civilian life. It poses dangers, and it is a resource. This thesis does not shy away from these contradictions. The interviewees listed above have never, to the best of my knowledge, engaged in unprofessional conduct, but we must recognize that "culture" can be a dangerous substance.

Is it any wonder that access to Special Forces units is difficult? That those serving within these institutions are filled with distrust and secrecy when, at every opportunity, someone in the media will publish a headline-grabbing story to sell a paper? As with the majority of fields, issues take place. Let us just look at politics and politicians if you want to compare "elite communities:" as anthropologists from George E. Marcus to sociologists like C. Wright Mill showed, the power of an elite comes, in part, from separation, distance, and intense networks.

I was fortunate to bridge this gap through my professional service experience. Having walked the line myself, having lived shared experiences, having developed and learned the same habitus within these exclusive fields and cultures, I had lived behind the curtain.

Selection of interviewees was critical to my research. I know each participant personally having either served with or worked alongside each one of them at some stage in my career. I spent a considerable amount of time selecting each participant as I wanted to cover a large period of time where Special Forces units as well as those that serve within them have undergone considerable change as an effect of societal changes such as the advent of the internet, physical connectivity due to accessible and affordable travel, the impact of civilian-recognised courses and qualifications, and, as a direct result of this, the expansion and dilution of the security jobs market. Combined now also with variations and frequency of conflict, intensity of deployment, and new found zest in certain sectors of society, such as the and politics, to interrogate, scrutinise, and draw on the "symbolic capital" of operators. It was vital to my research to be in a position to cover the same questions with operators from different cultures and years to ensure I could develop a well-balanced and comparative study.

Still, though, I had to convince my research participants that my research aim was principled and beneficial to them. I had to reassure them that our discussions would remain on topic and that I would keep to the research plan. One must remember that these interviewees participated in hundreds of actions worldwide, some even on their nation's home soil, against threats to society or the international community. I could never share the details. Just look at the legacy investigations against former soldiers who served in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and the more modern conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2021, at the beginning of my research, the process of seeking and securing Tier-2 ethical approval for the project, *Warrior Networks,* was important

to me when framing the key issues in my mind, such as "Risk/Benefit." As already stated, there is little anthropological research on Special Forces, despite the large amount of anthropological research on the military and militarism (see Chapter 1). So, as you would expect, civil-military transition is a topic dominated by studies of negative experiences of military life and transition among regular troops. I had to be careful that my work was sensitive to issues of PTSD, alcohol abuse, and violence, but I was not trained yet on how to approach this topic.

In the Summer of 2021, I applied for ethical approval for my research project from Maynooth University's Social Research Ethics Subcommittee (SRESC). At the same time, as part of my first-year PhD studies, I was completing Department of Anthropology mock research ethics reviews. Together, these processes provided opportunities for critical reflection on my project and, in the case of the SRESC process, explicit pointers about how to approach, gather, and store sensitive data. The process is iterative: it involved resubmission following revision of my consent framework and tightening of data storage. And, in October 2021, I received a positive ethical review (ID: 2444730) and permission to begin.

With a clearer understanding of the risk of traumatizing research participants, I openly asked participants about experiences of PTSD, and trauma more broadly, and excluded anyone who might be at risk. I also took steps like seeking informed consent, giving participants an information sheet well in advance of a recorded interview, which was an undertaking that data would be anonymised and later destroyed. In fact, because of the sensitivity of the topic, I took additional precautions to digitally hash and encrypt my interview data, to comply with GDPR and ethical norms for sensitive material. University Ethical Approval was granted

with these kinds of precautions in place, but the process of gaining approval was a learning experience, which sharpened my topic, the questions I asked, and a powerful reminder to check in with participants during recorded interviews to assure them that they could break off the process at any point.

Additionally, my journey through life up to the point where I had to begin selecting and interviewing participants allowed me to look back on personal experiences with reporters and the media, none of it positive or good. This gave me a foundation from which to build. I still had to convince the participants about the benefit of such research, and rather than shy away, following assurances, they were more than happy to share their stories, although tempered for the audience. I conducted "trial" interviews first in 2021, and then more regularly in 2022 and 2023, whenever the opportunity arose.

Initially, I shared with the participants a list of prepared questions for which I had already obtained ethical approval from the university. As stated, each participant gave informed consent, and I kept all interviewees separate. Hence, no participant knew precisely who the other participants were in relation to the study, regardless of whether they knew each other outside of this research, thereby ensuring complete anonymity of each participant. I also conducted the majority of interviews face-to-face despite the global pandemic restrictions. I shared all data related to the participant with the participant at regular intervals throughout the research for their approval, thereby providing complete transparency. I conducted multiple interviews with each participant, up to four in some cases.

By taking seriously the words and stories of the above research participants, this thesis will show that the general social-scientific literature

reduces military to civilian transition to generic images of the military. Military culture becomes the fraternity-like barracks, possibly a "total institution" (Goffman 1976) that houses brutality, discipline and aggressive socialization. Transition then becomes a story of brutalized bodies and minds that must be reintegrated—a "home coming"—but remain shadowed by dangerous elements of military culture in the form of trauma or shadow networks (e.g. Sørensen 2015; Bigo 2014; Masco 2014; Dower 2011). Once this image has fixed, and a process identified a process of governmental pathology making emerges (see also Malkki 1995).

However, other stories are possible. There is, in fact, a higher percentage of successful former armed forces members who have now transferred to the private sector than there are of those who slip through the cracks of society and fall foul of trauma, the law, alcohol, or suicide. Furthermore, Special Forces often transition well to public and private sector roles. On the other hand, the power of bonding, secrecy, and sharing shapes robust networks, which aid but also canalize ex-Forces members. Ethnography has often been the best story-telling mechanism for contradictory narratives, allowing one to follow jagged lines and trace partial connections. The framework I chose to adopt is an anthropological engagement with Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu's Framework

There is a literature on key sociological aspects of military life, such as social identity (see Hockey 1986; also, Goffman 1976) and gender—research emphasises

the idea of "military masculinities" (see Higate 2003). But much of this research shows that limited approaches are unsustainable: institutional culture crosses over to gender and self-identity; there is continuity across the social field. Therefore, researchers have looked to social theory to inform a broader approach.

In *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu outlines interrelated categories of experience: habitus, field, and capital. To perform as a teacher, doctor, or even a Special Forces operator you must become competent in culture, and therefore in habitus, field, and capital. *Habitus* is the (unconscious) dispositions that emerge in social interaction and experience. These dispositions are durable and transposable, so a Special Forces operator will learn a strong set of dispositions, such as calm leadership in crisis, and may be able to transpose this disposition to another environment. Habitus is also learned by the body. It feels natural. When X happens one responds naturally with Y, and one expects that others who are competent respond with a Y also. Bourdieu (1990: 56) says that it is "embodied history, internalised as a second nature and so forgotten as history". But where is habitus acquired? Bourdieu (1990) says that habitus is forged in a "field", such as the military, or a regiment, or a small, specialized unit. Culture is reproduced in a field because that's where rules and forms are enacted as habitus. Individuals struggle for position in hierarchies, for status and capital, and in so doing, in the act of differentiating themselves, they are acquiring habitus and giving life to the field. A field may also be different from other fields, and it may stand in contrast, so the Special Forces operator works in the shadows to protect those in the innocent light; they work at night to keep you safe when you sleep. And some fields of civilians will look on the field of the Special Forces as a place of "real"

distinction. Fields mark themselves with capital, basically the resource that people understand to be at stake — cultural capital such as reputation, power and prestige, knowledge and skill or crude financial capital, as in money. Capital may or may not be transposable — "leadership" may transfer from the battlefield to the office, but physical bravery may not.

Of course, it is possible to immediately apply this framework to other institutions and organizations where extreme elitism exists, such as multinational IT companies, the global banking sector, or professional sportsmanship. We find that each organization has unique core constructs. However, certain aspects represent similar values and ethos encountered across and translated into all sectors while remaining unique within their social-organizational construct.

We now take the generic transitioning soldier and look at this from a Special Forces soldier's perspective. Very little has been written about the transition of a Special Forces operator in this respect. I will, therefore, break my research into four main parts: field, habitus, capital, and network. Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) study of cultural capital, habitus, and field will provide me with the framework to assess how these concepts impact and can be related to a group of soldiers drawn from all walks of life who undertake a challenge where the pass rate is measured as a tiny percentage compared to other parts of society and indeed within the rest of the military. What makes someone volunteer in the first instance? The fact that you must volunteer for a course that is mentally, physically, and emotionally challenging, where there is no positive encouragement from course management, where, in fact, the opposite is accurate, and you are constantly asked to look within yourself and where you are encouraged to question

everything from your physical to mental suitability for service. A course of selection where you must decide to withdraw yourself from the course unless a safety violation or a medical issue arises, where the student cannot continue as they are deemed a risk to themselves or other course participants.

Undoubtedly, individual characteristics play a role in transition, but so do the institutions, networks, and the unique "community" (Brunger et al 2013). The Special Forces community stands apart from other military or police branches (e.g. Danielsen 2018). The nature of their work, bound by official secrets acts, creates barriers to successful transition. The signing of such documents, along with self-imposed secrecy and the mystery surrounding these units, and public perceptions and misconceptions, all contribute to the complexity of their transition.

However, what are the specifics of transition beyond a broad sense of "field" (e.g., Bourdieu 1990)? Which fields do these former elite operators gravitate towards, where, and why? Do they reach the boardroom, reenlist, or fail to achieve their objectives, and if so, how does the network respond? Moreover, what exactly is the network here? An "old boy network," a shadow institution, or something like an ad hoc assemblage? Here, I bring Social Network Analysis (SNA) and visualization (e.g., Ferguson) to the anthropology of networks (e.g., Bourdieu 1986) for an as-yet unstudied and occluded topic.

The core research question revolves around the pivotal role of networks. Drawing on the insights of Pierre Bourdieu (1990) on (in this case military) institutional culture, "habitus" and "fields", I will delve into the power of networks in providing access to information, opportunity, and support. Following Bourdieu, I will explore Didier Bigo's (2016) speculation about the existence of transnational

security "guilds". The international elite Special Forces community is a small, tightly-knit group; operators and units from various nationalities often train and deploy with one another. This presents an ideal case study to evaluate Bigo's claims, expanding to questions of reciprocity, durability, and kinship (gendered "brotherhood") in the scholarship (e.g. Strathern 1996), and contribute to the anthropological and psychological literature on military/civilian transitions and security culture more broadly (see Ben-Ari and Sørensen 2019; Low and Maguire 2019).

Chapter 1: The Field

He came from the shadows. ...

We were a couple of weeks into my first operational tour with 2 Para, a six-month deployment in Northern Ireland. Each company-sized group was assigned to an AO or "area of operation." My company was assigned to Crossmaglen in Armagh, "Bandit Country", a very dangerous place. Our base was just off the main square, adjacent to the GAA club and pitch where we landed Chinook helicopters. All other airframes were landed within the walls of the base. Our vehicles were rarely used due to the level of risk associated with road moves. We either left the base on foot by "Hard Targeting"—when soldiers sprint, zigzagging, to cover—or by helicopter from within the base to some area outside of the town where we would hard target from the helicopter to cover before regrouping and beginning our patrol. Throughout the so-called Troubles, over 160 soldiers and police officers were killed in Armagh with many killed in or around Crossmaglen.

Just off the square in Crossmaglen, we had a "Sanger," a hardened defensive instillation occupied by troops for observation, but from where troops could also deploy or provide supporting fire in the event of an attack. The sanger's official designation was Golf Five Zero, but it was

known to us as Borucki Sanger, so named after a fallen 19-year-old soldier from 3 Para. Other sangers dotted the countryside, all referred to as "Golf Towers" because they were strategically placed on elevated ground to observe the surrounding countryside. Access to these towers typically took place by foot or by helicopter. The terminology, the strategic use of space, and the danger, all take time to understand, experience, feel. But there are mysteries for insiders also.

Throughout the Troubles, plenty of units worked in Northern Ireland, including quite a few specialist units such as the Special Air Service (SAS). However, as a young soldier, you are not privy to all the groups operating on the ground or fully aware of their roles and responsibilities. One such unit was DET, "the Detachment," established during the Troubles to undertake surveillance and reconnaissance missions, and DET was keen to recruit females and soldiers originally from Southern Ireland.

When not on patrol or conducting other military activities, soldiers rotated through the observation and guard force role within the base or when in the Golf Towers. Of course, there was a CCTV room in the main base, manned 24/7.

I was taking my turn to sit in the darkened CCTV room with my back partially turned to the door when I sensed someone passing over the

threshold. I turned to look, and my heart sunk to my toes: there standing looking at me was a man with long, scraggly hair, wearing a nonstandard camouflaged smock, blue jeans, mountain boots, and holding a cut-down Heckler & Koch assault rifle. My first thought was that I was about to be murdered by an IRA man, but we just looked at each other. "Mind if I sit down?" he asked. Without waiting for my answer, he plopped into the seat next to me and began to tell me about myself, where I was from, who my parents were, the names of other family members, and so on.

In the military, you hear stories about "secret squirrel" units, Pathfinders, the SAS, rarely DET. They operate in a parallel world, glimpsed in a parallax way: in the orderly, disciplined field of military life, there is a section devoted to winks, nods, and wildness (Author's reflections 2024).

In On War, Carl von Clausewitz (1976, 127-47) analytically separates the business of fighting from the myriad activities required to enable the use of force and the other uses of military forces besides warfighting. "War is served by many activities quite different from it," he says. Moreover, "Preparatory activities [are sometimes] excluded from the narrower meaning of the art of war—the actual conduct of war—because they are concerned only with the creation, training, and maintenance of the fighting forces." According to this logic, the military is a large-scale institution, a bureaucracy, a (temporary) home, and a collection of ideas that sometimes engage in violence on behalf of a state or other interests. Moreover, as the opening reflection shows, it is not transparent, even to itself.

Therefore, if the military can be seen as a sprawling social institution that sometimes looks inwards and sometimes outwards, then it can also be regarded as a place of cultural production, with goods and services, knowledge, hierarchy, competition, internal antagonism, and conflict. The military, in short, is a "field." For Pierre Bourdieu, fields are structured and delimited spaces where one finds the production of identifiable types of capital. As actors engage in the production of capital, they also compete for it, and play by rules when doing so, even if the rules are not written or ever easy to articulate. For my purposes here, the concept of field is a useful way to bring ethnographic elements together, like the semi-enclosed culture of the military, its symbols, and structures, while also understanding socialization, which is felt by the body and so acquires substance. In *The Logic of Practice,* Bourdieu thus looks at George Duby's discussion of the "religion" of the medieval knights:

> When a warrior took an oath, what counted most in his eyes was not the commitment of his soul but a bodily posture, the contact that his hand, laid on the cross, the Scriptures or a bag of relics, had with the sacred. When he stepped forward to become the liege man of a lord, it was again an attitude, a position of the hands, a ritual sequence of words, which only had to be uttered in order to bind the contract (quoted in Bourdieu 1990: 295).

To tap into this level, how the body connects to the institutional field, and yet show how conflict, tension, and power also work, I will use Bourdieu's concepts to structure this thesis. Others have done this too (see Cooper et al 2016). However, I am not looking at "soldiers" in general. This thesis is about Special

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Forces—an institution within an institution. Therefore, the limitations of "field theory" must be acknowledged. Otherwise, it will seem to explain everything, whereas, in fact, it is just a device.

For Bourdieu, the social field is a complex entity, composed of specific fields, each defined by the activities of social agents, making it a dynamic system. The agents possess capital of various kinds appropriate to the field in which they operate, such as economic, social, or symbolic capital. Each field may have an uneven distribution of forms of capital—successful entrepreneurs may be high on economic capital but low on symbolic capital, while artists may be praised while starving. Capital is intricately connected to habitus, the body-involved structure of feeling. For instance, as I delve into later, sport is part of the social field, and boxing is a specific sport in which boxers have capital connected to their habitus—prize fighters fight for a purse but also for honour, glory, perhaps revenge, and so on, and their habitus may be shaped by social class, economic status, perhaps luck and talent. Theoretically, habitus is transposable, but, and this is the subject of my research, we must ask if the boxer can transpose his habitus easily, or if they are canalized into certain choices.

The most apparent problem with Bourdieu's "field" is available in the example of the boxer. The boxer is a prize fighter (in this example), but we also imagine a family member, perhaps a part-time worker in another field. A singular field, therefore, may not be able to explain the transposition of habitus. To this, Bourdieu would state that we must explore the interaction of fields and the relative attraction of capital within them—say, the decision by the boxer to follow a family member's recommendation and seek a new, more lasting, less risky, perhaps

better-paid career. However, this raises another well-known criticism of Bourdieu, made famous by Dan O'Hara (2000), the so-called Red Queen problem: what explains people running to stay still, fighting to stay on a ticket with no prospect of economic or symbolic increase in capital? All of this comes to the fore in this project, a study of elite forces with the military, where the capital, economic and symbolic, is secret and, therefore, somewhat outside standard exchange value. To think about all of this, we must examine the history of military Special Forces.

The field of warfighting

Military forces are typically wrapped in national symbols. However, military institutions are also wrapped in their own traditions, concerned with the living and the invisible army of the dead. Behind tradition, one finds passion, and sacred values connected to sacrifice. Jonathan Littell (2010: 39) mined into this in *The Kindly Ones:*

> Political philosophers have often pointed out that in wartime, the citizen, the male citizen at least, loses one of his most basic rights, the right to life; and this has been true ever since the French Revolution and the invention of conscription, now an almost universally accepted principle. But these same philosophers have rarely noted that the citizen in question simultaneously loses another right, one just as basic and perhaps even more vital for his conception of himself as a civilised human being: the right not to kill. No one asks you for your opinion. In most cases the man standing

above the mass grave no more asked to be there than the one lying, dead or dying, at the bottom of the pit.

Special Forces, as we know them today, play an outsized role in the military landscape, partly because in an era of volunteer professional armies, such forces are the ultimate volunteers—they are the "tip of the spear." However, it is important to note that such configurations have long existed historically. Rome had its Praetorians, Byzantium had the Varangians, Knights Templar protected medieval crusaders and pilgrims, and the Ottoman Empire deployed Janissaries to significant effect. These professional warriors were retained for various reasons, from maintaining order to enforcing the will of the emperor or prince and, of course, warfare. In the event of war, the professional warrior would be tasked with organising, training, and developing an effective fighting force from citizens, typically a rag-tag bunch of labours or farmers. "This is our profession," the Spartans tell the Greek citizen-soldiers as they marched towards certain death at Thermopylae.

Some commentators believe that direct-action operations by Special Forces are a new phenomenon. However, even when blocking the Persian advance into Greece at Thermopylae, the Spartan elite, the *Krypeteia*, launched a raid on the Persian camp, causing great destruction. Perhaps because Special Forces operations are both secret and spectacular, such actions are now celebrated. When a small unit takes the initiative and conducts a clandestine action against a numerically superior enemy, such an operation creates "shock and awe," often

resulting in an outsized strategic victory—the role of 22 SAS is commonly described in Whitehall as "visiting paralyzing force on the enemies of the crown."

Such forces sometimes grow through accretion, adding new specialties and putting them to new uses. During the 18th century, Napoleon Bonaparte maintained an elite force, initially acting as his bodyguard, the Imperial Guard. The Guard grew over time into a much larger formation, and their role expanded into that of a deployable tactical reserve unit. As the unit grew, so did its capabilities, eventually encompassing engineering, cavalry, maritime, and various regiments of fusilier and foot troops. Selection for the Imperial Guard required a candidate to have some education, be of above average height, and have been involved in several campaigns, serving as "Young," "Middle," or the elite "Old Guard." Chandler writes that the Imperial Guard was "one of the most celebrated military formations in history" (1993: 205).

Moreover, the history of the Guard speaks to how "specialization" dovetails with technological advances. Modern Special Forces coevolved with the development of firearms. During the Napoleonic Wars, the British Army developed light infantry units composed of sharpshooters, who were highly fit, and better equipped and trained than regular troops, who generally fought lightning engagements with the enemy. These units broke with the typical martial tradition of the time. They marched at a double pace to cover more ground; their uniforms were green, and they wielded the latest rifle technology. These units scouted enemy positions, reporting on force strengths, locations, and composition, and sometimes, they would undertake raids on the enemy's flanks or at tactically strategic targets. They were also used to lead larger infantry units in major assaults

against enemy strong points. These light infantry units became a mainstay of the British armed forces, the rifle regiments.

World War I developed into a hellscape of death and destruction. For years, the front lines changed hardly at all. Artillery and machine guns fixed the enemy in place. The machine gun was a new phenomenon, delivering a rate of fire higher than that of horse archers for the first time in history. Weapon systems such as the German-designed Spandau MG 08 and the British Vickers machine guns gave military forces a multiplier. These weapon systems had a cyclic rate of fire of up to 450-500 rounds per minute—whereas a proficient rifleman could only manage about 15 rounds per minute from his bolt action rifle. Strategically placed and sighted machine gun positions, with interlocking arks of fire, enabled defenders to cut down large numbers of advancing troops in mere seconds. In just one day during the battle along the Somme, an estimated 21,000 British soldiers were killed, with a large proportion of the casualties attributed to machine gunfire.

Manoeuvrability and innovation were needed, but the industrial-strength bureaucracy on both sides locked the frontlines into a dance macabre. The intransigence of the old and powerful and the sacrifice of the young shapes Wilfred Owen's poetry:

> If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
>
> Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
>
> And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
>
> His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
>
> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

Pro patria mori.

The German command was the first to seek an alternative to the ceaseless slaughter without a clear strategic outcome. The Germans developed the *Sturmtruppen* or Stormtroopers, a highly motivated and dedicated force that struck fear into their enemies by using better weapon systems such as the MP18 submachine gun, pistols for close-quarter battle, and satchels of hand grenades. Infiltration tactics were utilised, and the Stormtroopers began to operate with a high degree of autonomy from central command. At the same time, snipers came into their own, with small numbers of trained shooters showing the ability to pin down large numbers of the enemy. These elite and highly respected sharpshooters led the charge in the development of better ammunition, which eventually led to the development of better and more reliable firearms with experience gained through constant use and the changing requirements the soldier encountered on the battlefield. These "end users" understood these firearms as the tools of their trade, and like Levi-Strauss's "bricoleurs," they began to modify those tools, "playing" with a relatively "fixed repertoire" and causal, recursive relationship with the world (1966: 1-35).

Eventually, military leaders grasped the benefits of delivering specialized kinetic force. Weapons platforms changed, and soon, it was conceivable that units of highly trained troops would go into action with rapid-fire weapons platforms to deliver "paralyzing force."

Of course, improvements were soon made to defensive tactics, personal protective armour, vehicles, and battle space control in an endless game of castles and cannons, to quote Maguire and Westbrook (2020). A striking example of this military dialectic and bricolage is the development of modern camouflage by the British army. During the second Boer War, Simon Frazer (Lord Lovat) formed the Lovat Scouts and borrowed the shooting and concealment approach of Scottish "Ghillies," men who worked the large private estates as professional stalkers, gamekeepers, and anti-poachers. These men, again like Levi-Strauss's "bricoleurs," added local material to their "Ghillie Suits," becoming part of the landscape.

The Germans innovated further with the development of telescopic scopes, putting them in the devastating hands of former professional hunters, marksmen, and sport sharpshooters. Later, they borrowed parachuting techniques from Russia and suddenly could drop highly trained specialist units into theatres of operation. The German parachutists, *Fallschirmjäger*, or parachute rangers took the lessons, tactics, and techniques from past conflicts, embracing the latest equipment, and formed highly specialised self-contained fighting units comprised of engineers, snipers, machine gunners, combat medics, and grenadier infantry. These highly trained and motivated troops are among the first, recognizably modern Special Forces units. German also developed the *Brandenburgers* commando unit. During

World War II, Nazi Germany had a spear tip like no other military. The final "proof of concept" came on 12 September 1943, when an operation commenced to "rescue" a deposed and captive Benito Mussolini from a mountain-top prison in the Gran Sasso d'Italia mountain range in north-eastern Italy. Operation Eiche (Operation Oak) was planned and led by Harald Otto Morslead, an early *Fallschirmjagers* champion, together with the infamous SS Hauptsturmführer Otto Skorzeny, a soldier with an imposing 6ft 3" frame crowned with a massive facial scar, the result of youthful sabre duelling. The mission combined Luftwaffe and SS forces from Amt VI, Ausland-SD, who were at that time the SS foreign intelligence service department of the RSHA (the Reich Security Main Office who were tasked with training operatives in sabotage, espionage, and paramilitary operations). The mission was an absolute and complete success. Skorzeny, the fearsome Nazi, showcased modern, fit-for-purpose commando warfare.

Military paradigms, like scientific ones, do not shift quickly, but when they do, there tends to be a "spontaneous synthesis" (see Foucault 2008). For example, history has largely forgotten the "Frogmen" of the WWII Italian Navy. The men of Decima MAS (Decima Mezzi d'Assalto, or the men of the 10th Assault Vehicle Flotilla) were to become the best frogmen of any nation that deployed this unique skill. Their missions are the stuff of legend. They would use two or more frogmen, equipped with underwater delivery vehicles that were armed with torpedoes, infiltrate well-defended enemy-held harbours, sink ships, and slip away unseen—a breakthrough in maritime asymmetric warfare.

The Axis powers were keen innovators, then, but the Allies also showed organizational creativity. The British developed their own Commando forces in

1940. In 1942 the United States ordered the development of several Ranger Battalions like the British Commandos, "the First Green Berets" (Loescher 1969). However, these specialised military units were still quite large and more akin to elite infantry than modern Special Forces. Since World War II, the trend has been towards smaller and more specialised autonomous groups, mobile, and self-sufficient in the field.

One of the earliest 'new type' units was the British LRP or No. 1 Long Range Patrol formed in the early part of the WWII campaign in North Africa. Formed in Egypt in June of 1940 by Major Ralph Alger Bangold under the direction of General Archibald Wavell, the LRP were tasked with long range reconnaissance of Italian forces. The LRP as initially composed of former New Zealand farmers-turned-soldiers and later Rhodesian commonwealth soldiers recruited due to their experience of austere farming environments. As the LRP later expanded in size it recruited volunteer troops drawn across the commonwealth.

The LRP's name changed to better reflect its role, becoming the famed Long-range Desert Group (LRDG), the eyes and ears of the British 8th Army, specialists in extreme navigation patrols, recovery of spies, aircrew, and commando forces. They also utilised their extensive desert navigation and survival experience to assist the newly established SAS, a unit devoted to hit and run attacks on Axis airfields situated well behind enemy lines. The LRDG units were frequently deployed for long durations, sometimes over a month at a time, continuously operating behind enemy lines (see Morgan 2011).

The partnership between the LRDG and SAS is a formative moment in Special Forces history. On 01 July 1941, the Special Air Service or SAS was formed by David Stirling, "the Phantom Major" (Cowles, 2010). Stirling was related through his father's marriage to the Lovat family founders of the Lovat Scouts. During its early years, the SAS was blessed by its connections to the British establishment and to famous martial families, but it is doubtless true that the extraordinary soldiers in its ranks did the heavy lifting. Among them, none stands reputationally taller than Lieutenant Colonel Robert Blair "Paddy" Mayne from Newtownards in Northern Ireland. Before the war, Mayne showed his athleticism as a rugby player, capped six times for his country, and qualified as a solicitor. However, he also acquired a reputation as a hard drinker and ferocious fighter. In 1939, he commissioned into the 5th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery (Territorial Army). It is ironic that in one of his early OTC reports he was described as "unpromising material for a combat regiment, undisciplined, unruly and generally unreliable" (Bradford and Dillon 2011: 16).

In April of 1940, Mayne joined a Royal Artillery Territorial unit then transferred to the Royal Ulster Rifles, then to the Royal Cameroonians, and on to No. 11 (Scottish) Commando. While he was touring the Army, David Stirling was forming the SAS, an innovative unit regarded with suspicion by the Army's conservative officer class. Indeed, the idea of deploying small units, relatively lightly armed but highly mobile and generally unsupported, was heretical within the military. Even the commandos, brainchild of Prime Minister Winston Churchill, were treated as an aberration. David Stirling was a volunteer in No. 8 (Guards) Commando, known as Layforce, which was disbanded due to losses and

mismanagement. This disbandment had the unforeseen outcome of providing human resources for experimental units, one of which was L Detachment, Special Air Service Brigade, formed to attack Axis forces using small units of highly trained and manoeuvrable forces. However, their first mission, codenamed Operation Squatter, a Parachute insertion operation targeting airfields West of Tobruk, was an outright failure — 43 of the unit's 65 men were killed, wounded, or captured. Those 22 who escaped did so with the assistance of the LRDG.

Figure 2: British Army Regulars on Parade

Source: Bournemouth Echo, 2021

Figure 3: A close-up of a heavily armed patrol of 'L' Detachment SAS

Source: Long Range Desert Group, Jan. 18, 1943. Imperial War Museum photo

German forces captured David Stirling in January 1943, so command passed to Paddy Mayne, who reorganized the SAS into two units, the Special Raiding Squadron (SRS), and the Special Boat Section (SBS). Soon, the SAS was completing missions successfully, indeed it had an outsized impact on the course of the war. Despite this, in 1949, the SAS was disbanded. Members from allied countries returned to their national forces, spreading the Special Forces model to Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere.

In some ways, the early history of the SAS established a template for Special Forces, a lasting innovation in warfighting, but its history must be understood in a broader "spontaneous synthesis" (see Foucault 2008). We must consider, for example, the adjacent evolution of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), specialists in irregular warfare, sabotage, intelligence gathering and the recruitment and training of local forces. The SOE took pains to recruit female operators, many of whom distinguished themselves during secret, complex and dangerous missions, but few of whom became household names. In the Asian theatre of operations, Force 136 was comparable to the SOE, and, again, it made good use of female operatives. One also must consider the First Special Service Force or Devil's Brigade, a large commando unit, this time North America, formed in response to a particular challenge, the Axis infrastructure presence in Scandinavia. The First Special Service Force is considered a forerunner of Canada's Special Operations Regiment and Joint Task Force 2 or JTF 2, and the United States of America's First Special Forces Command and 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment – Delta, known today as Delta Force or Combat Applications Group (CAG).

It is clear, then, from this early history that Special Forces are a very specific "field" in Bourdieu's sense of the term. These forces part of the broader military field but are distinct in many ways. They were formed in response to specific challenges, difficult terrain, the prosecution or irregular warfare, the desire to disrupt enemy logistics and morale, for example. The capability Special Forces represented during World War II was felt as a need in most theatres and by most military forces. Sometimes new organizational "assemblages" arise in this way, to meet a specific challenge, before dissipating, and sometimes they spread out and across organizations rather than developing vertical roots. The pattern been analysed as "rhizomatic" growth, but in the case of Special Forces, the more accurate botanical analogy is *etiolation*, unstable growth in partial darkness.

After World War II, allied countries disbanded most of the famous Special Forces units—without the highly specific challenges, the special operators were not needed, or so military high commanders believed. During the late 1940's, the British understood that the world was now raising challenges that specialists were best suited to meet. In 1947, they reinstated a new SAS regiment (21 SAS Artists Rifles) as a Territorial Army unit and five years later they formed a regular regiment, 22 SAS, followed by another territorial unit, 23 SAS. For its part, the United States retained the famous Rangers, the precursor to various Army Special Operations forces, while the Navy retained the UDT/Underwater Demolition Teams, which later evolved into the US Navy SEALs. In short, over time, militaries became accustomed to, though not necessarily comfortable with, these fields within fields. Secretive units, with different behaviours, communicated by

different clothes and styles of dress, composed of competitive, high-functioning and closely bonded teams of warriors.

Throughout the 20th century, Special Forces operated quietly, professionally, and in the shadows. But there was a watershed moment in Princess Gate, London, 1980. Terrorists ceased control of the Iranian Embassy. A lengthy siege ensued. Eventually, under threat of extreme violence, the civilian power granted temporary authority to 22 SAS, and black-clad men exploded into the popular imagination. Some operators whose words are recorded for this thesis describe being mesmerized by the scene that unfolded on television, the extraordinary discipline, and tactics—abseiling from roof tops, leaping from balcony to balcony—and the superhuman competence of the operators. Civilian authorities do not like to pass control to military forces, but sometimes they must do so; army generals prefer conventional troops, but they recognize the need for unconventional ones. Today, the new reality is (grudgingly) accepted: professional warfighting requires special operators. Wars may be peer-to-peer, but they are more likely to be low-intensity irregular conflicts, and so specialists do the heavy lifting, and in some cases all the lifting.

Of course, there are other histories that could be discussed to give a full statement on Special Forces, from the role of MACV SOG in Vietnam to the Rhodesian "bush war," but the important points are made without an exhaustive discussion. Like the rise and ubiquity of police SWAT teams, special operations units are now a *sine qua non* in the modern military. Each SF units has its own history, often a heroic phase of frugal innovation by founding individuals, which led to an inward facing culture, amplified by competition with peer units in

neighbouring countries. Indeed, many founders (sometimes known as "the originals") ran elite units like fiefdoms, which compounded the social feeling that this was an elite club, selective, secretive, with its own rules, and reputationally obsessed. For example, asking for the assistance of other units, or countries, is reputationally ruinous. That said, today there is increasing "interoperability" between top-tier units that have broadly similar initial selection course, or SFQC "Special Forces Qualification Course," and are allies. So, what are the comparable features in this global "field"?

As mentioned in the introduction, above, much of the large body of anthropological research on the military and militarism is concerned with regular troops, the impact of military action, and foreign policy, on communities studied by anthropologists, and on national security "cultures," and the deployment of private military companies (PMCs) (e.g., Lutz 2001; Masco 2014; Gonzales, Gusterson and Houtman 2019). The net effect has been the production of a "dark anthropology" that sometimes projects politics into unseen spaces. When it comes to Special Forces, if mentioned at all, they are labelled as "weapons" in service of "imperial commitments" (Masco 2014: 204) or secretive members of a dangerous club. Gonzales, Gusterson and Houtman (2019: 161), for example, cite a sign that hangs in Fort Bragg which says, "Rule 1: There are no Rules;" Rule 2: See Rule 1."

Of course, even pure speculation can be correct, at least some of the time.[1] Gonzales, Gusterson and Houtman (2019) are correct in arguing that the very

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[1] I add to Gonzales, Gusterson and Houtman's (2019) brief comments on the pipeline between Special Forces and PMCs by exploring this ethnographically, and by commenting on the "positives" as well as the potential dangers (see Chapter 5).

structure of Special Forces—secrecy, violence, a lack of external oversight—lends itself to abuse, and there have been documented cases of abusive behaviour, such as the case of the Canadian elite Airborne Regiment. As discussed in the Introduction, in 1990s Somalia, Airborne troops developed an aggressive and enclosed mindset when fighting with local militia. They shot thieves, and, disgracefully, captured, tortured, and murdered a 16-year-old thief. An official inquiry confirmed that a secretive and insular "culture" was partly to blame. But, how do we study a secret field, theoretically and empirically, even ethnographically?

A secret field?

According to Pierre Bourdieu, fields are dynamic because they are defined by the activities of social agents. These agents possess capital of various kinds. As we have seen, one of "the originals," David Stirling was able to use his socially privileged background and connections to the Lovat family to support the formation of the SAS during World War II. Blair "Paddy" Maine, on the other hand, lacked this social capital yet was a far more effective soldier and leader, and he arguably left a greater legacy of professionalism and institutional knowledge. In a sense, then, competence is a form of capital—one's track record of achievement, and the predictive reassurance it gives to those primarily interested in getting the job done.

Perhaps because Bourdieu was, unsurprisingly, interested in intellectual and artistic production, he does not dwell on competence or efficacy. After all, art, like beauty, is judged subjectively, via social agreement, rather than being based

on intrinsic quality, though some work is plainly "better" in the sense that a community will agree that it is more attuned, erudite, creative. Therefore, Bourdieu turns from subjectively evaluative fields to sport to explore how a relatively autonomous field, layered with competition, that emphasizes physical prowess, operates:

> If it is the case, as my questions tend to suggest, that the system of the institutions and agents whose interests are bound up with sport tends to function as a field, it follows that one cannot directly understand what sporting phenomena are at a given moment in a given social environment by relating them directly to the economic and social conditions of the corresponding societies: the history of sport is a relatively autonomous history which, even when marked by the major events of economic and social history, has its own tempo, its own evolutionary laws, its own crises, in short, its specific chronology (Bourdieu 1978: 821).

However, Bourdieu, in an effort to understand the "reality" in such "relatively autonomous" fields, elides the individual while highlighting powerful social forces. Rugby, he says, has a "cult of teamwork" (ibid. 830), and sports generally offer "boys" "physical capital" useful for upward mobility in the way "beauty" is useful to females, often marketed as "success stories" (ibid.). this is plainly a deficient understanding of sport—a concept of teamwork is ideological and effective; physical capital requires physical performance; and success is plainly for the few.

This is why Loic Wacquant's ethnography of Chicago prize fighters is so important: Wacquant shows how their field is infused with different types of capital, and how they train the body to and "soul" in search of money, reputation, perhaps even immortality.[2] Wacquant's ethnography certainly shows that the field in which the boxer operates may be delimited, and is filled with identifiable forms of capital, such as economic, social, or symbolic capital. However, the boxer is a prize fighter, who works in the daylight. O'Hara (2000) highlights the Red Queen problem: what explains people running to stay still, fighting to stay on a ticket with no prospect of economic or symbolic increase in capital? In the world of the Special Forces, this becomes the problem of seeking out darkness rather than glory in sun light. Moreover, one expects habitus is transposable, that "transition" occurs, but, and this is the subject of the rest of this research, does our theoretical knowledge of the field of military Special Forces give us empirical answers about practice there and transition outwards to civilian life?

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[2] The book also has many critics, for example: "*Body and Soul* is the select experiences of an excited neophyte who enacts a fantasy of an engaged masculine body among the black urban poor as he moves up a progressively whiter professional ladder that increasingly values the mental over the physical. While his exuberance lends the language of *Body and Soul* a visceral immediacy (i.e. 'the intoxication of immersion' or the boxing gym as a 'vector of a de-banalization of everyday life'), it also suggests a theoretical disconnect that undercuts the descriptions of Woodlawn [gym] and its social context" (Hoffman and Fine 2005: 152).

Chapter 2: Habitus

I had just spent hours—I don't know how many—running until my heart nearly exploded in my chest, crawling through stagnant pools of water, crawling in darkness, being shouted at constantly, and yet utterly alone with my body: my organs fighting me as if possessed. Now, suddenly, I was expected to rest on command. So, I shuffled on blistered feet to my bedspace in the barracks. My "bed" was an old, green, rubber-coated army mattress on the floor, side-by-side with others, row upon row, like a graveyard. Next to each mattress was a "Bergan," a military rucksack. No. 44 was scrawled on mine. For the remainder of the selection process, I was number 44. No name, rank, or seniority here; we were all just numbers.

The lactic acid worked through my body, followed by the pain of old injuries returning to consciousness. However, there was no time to feel sorry for myself. I had been selected randomly to lead the group through preparation for the next course phase.

Soldiers, at least since the Spartans, are creatures of habit: they follow orders, and orders follow the routine, but it takes work to follow orders when your body is fighting to stay alive, and your brain is telling you to quit.

This is the point of selection: it is a process honed over generations to find weakness--perhaps an inability to control one's fears or take charge of others when need be. In the selection process, people show "their true

colors." This is why there is so much running, crawling, and shouting at the beginning. The aim is to get rid of the weak quickly, as if weakness is a disease that might infect others. Only hours before, dozens of fit, healthy, confident people stood ready to attempt the course. Now, just a few hours later, there were beds ready for occupants who never made it past the first phase. As I looked around the room at the filthy faces of the other survivors, I detected in them a sense of pride, defiance, and perhaps the returning spirit of competition.

– The author's memories of his own experience of selection, 2023.

The contribution of this research to social theory is in the form of its ethnographic engagement with Pierre Bourdieu's scholarship, an engagement that aims to bring his insights to the study of Special Forces and test the value of those insights (e.g., Bourdieu 1986; Grenfell 2013). When social scientists approach essential social institutions such as schools, prisons, or the military, they often do so by using the work of Bourdieu. Previously, social scientists often approached the military as a "total institution" (Goffman 1976) that houses a powerful socialization machine for reshaping human beings. Bourdieu's work allows us to explore the component elements of the machinery and understand socialization to imply social fields, implicate the body, and structure societal relations through the production of various forms of capital.

In the previous chapter, we explored the Special Forces "field," tracing its historical development and shedding light on the unique structure and operational culture of the units under study. We demonstrated how Bourdieu's

concept of field can illuminate the secretive world of the Special Forces operator. In this chapter, we delve deeper, using Bourdieu's concept of habitus to understand the process of entry into elite military units, the transformation of the operator's body and mind within this world, and the impact of this socialization on the competencies of team members.

Earlier, I showed that the field of Special Forces is an elite sub-set of the realm of military (and police) forces with its own history, relatively autonomous "laws," and logic of practice (Bourdieu 1984). "Capital"—here meaning rank/position, proven capability, and reputation—affects the position of different actors in a field. All fields are sites of struggle over "the stakes at stake" (Leander 2006: 3 passim; for an example, see Bigo 2001). However, people are not driven by strategy or awareness of position alone. Bourdieu introduces the concept of habitus to capture the often-unconscious templates for action, common sense knowledge, and fundamental "dispositions" that people have. Though habitus is vague and often hard to describe, it is the vital terrain of any institution. It is where many meaningful battles are won or lost. As security studies scholar Anna Leander puts it,

> The *habitus* shapes how a person sees the world and acts in it. Since doing the "right" thing is of essence, the *habitus* is also an important part of a person's "resources". It is therefore only logical that the *habitus* is also thought of as "incorporated capital". It is a resource embodied in the a person. The *habitus* is also incorporated in the strong sense of being having a bodily expression. The eating habits, interests, cultural choices etc. that

constitute a lifestyle produce the body and the body language that is what might be called a bodily *hexis*. This in turn is part and parcel defining social power and violence. … It reflects the inter-subjectively shared, taken for granted, values and discourses of a field, its *doxa*. The *doxa* in turn is shaped and reproduced through the *habitus* of the people in the field. However, the fields which a person is part of may (obviously) be multiple and vary over a life span. When a person enters a new field whose *doxa* is not yet reflected in the *habitus*, behaviour is bound to miss the many taken for granted, unwritten rules of that field and consequently appear clumsy and ill adjusted, a "Don Quichotte condition" or *hysteresis* (Leander 2006: 7-8 passim).

Leander leans in too far, at least for most anthropologists, by expressing all of this as "the [(*habitus*) (capital)] + field = practice formula" (Leander 2006: 9). Indeed, recently, anthropological work has expanded on the acquisition of embodied skill (e.g., Maguire 2014; Grasseni and Gieser 2019), the process summarised by Tim Ingold as "practical enskilment," or "the embodiment of capacities of awareness and response by environmentally situated agents" (Ingold 2000: 5). Nonetheless, habitus has explanatory power in my investigation of selection for and socialization within the field of Special Forces, and, as I will show later in this work, exit and incorporation into civilian life. So, how does it emerge in the world of Special Forces operators?

Selection

To most soldiers, the mere thought of volunteering for or undertaking a selection course to gain entry to the Special Forces is enough to put them off. Firstly, the applicant must meet stringent criteria such as conduct, experience, age, and time served. Next, the prospective candidate must obtain permission from his or her unit to undertake the course. Permission can be challenging to obtain as most units suffer from serious staffing issues, and the best soldiers from those units tend to maintain the ambition to progress and attempt Special Forces selection. As a general rule, those units do not want to lose their "best and brightest"; time, money, and investment made into the individual soldier up to this point is suddenly a potential loss if the prospective candidate successfully passes the rigors of selection and is accepted to serve in an elite unit.

Should the applicant receive the approval of their unit commander, the applicant now must undergo an interview with the perspective unit process and basic Special Forces fitness test which further whittles down the number of prospective candidates. Throughout this process, the candidate must endure months of self-preparation in core skills such as navigation, personal field administration, mental, physiological, and physical fitness, pain and extreme fatigue, calorie intake, and food deprivation management. The candidate will have to undergo extreme physical training to elevate his or her endurance levels to those of an Olympic athlete. (Military commentators say that physical preparedness for Special Forces selection is training like an Olympian but without knowing what discipline you will be competing in).

Once the prospective candidate has taken the decision, mental preparation is paramount. At no time on selection do directing staff offer encouragement. The opposite is closer to the truth. Therefore, the development of self-belief and the ability to not only attempt but surmount the unknown is a critical skill. The aspiring operator must complete all of this personal development while continuing to carry out her or his regular duties as a soldier. This means that physical training can amount to up to six training sessions per day for generally six days a week. Most candidates begin preparation for selection up to six months in advance. Throughout this period, the candidate is increasing distances covered, altering the terrain, increasing speed, managing weights carried in respect of the kit, improving their swimming techniques as well as the distances swam both with and without equipment, alternating training taking into account the different weather conditions and times of year and day. Generally, Special Forces selection is conducted in winter, so inclement weather conditions and shorter daylight periods are expected. All this is compounded by the fact that 90% of events on Special Forces selection are conducted as individual events, so self-discipline, personal motivation, resourcefulness, and mental well-being are cornerstones of an operator's psyche. At this point, it is helpful to pause and take in an actual account of the selection process by former operators. Here is a British operator describing his childhood and selection:

> I don't remember ever thinking about wanting to be a soldier. I wanted to be my father, you know, I think you want to emulate if you see your father as a big, strong, great man. And so then when the idea came, suddenly this

idea of joining the army, my mother said, you know, "Fine, join the army."

I thought, okay, that sounds like a good idea. But it was sort of her idea.

You know, "your mother knows you best." She said the best place for you

to sort you out is the army, and I thought, okay, and in those days, kids did

what their mothers told them. … I was 16 when I joined. […]

I wasn't a clueless buck. … I knew how to iron my kit, I knew how to

listen to what they told you, I knew to keep my nose clean. I wasn't one of

these clueless f**kers that, that doesn't get it. I knew that it was military.

[Partly because] of family, background in the Airforce and the Navy, as

well as the Infantry, you know, we had a commando in the family.

Figure 4: British Special Forces Selection, Brecon Beacons, where many recruits have died during training

Source: *The Telegraph, 2023*

Figure 5: Ireland's Army Ranger Wing during Training Exercise

Source: *The Journal, 2023*

Then in [-----], I got approached by the army, and they said, you your name has been brought to our attention, that you might be suitable for, for specialist training. And I went, "Oh, okay." What the f**k is this? You know? But this was my first introduction into the SAS, because they then sent me … someplace in the middle of f**king nowhere. And I went there. And I was doing all this running around and f**king about and apparently, I was on this on this course now. It was love at first sight! (interview 2023)

Here is an Irish operator describing his formative experiences and selection in roughly the same order:

I could go back as far as my childhood to my social influence, like, you know, I remember, like, I spend a lot of time, you know, I was reading a lot of, like, the comics, like, you know, about Commandos and stuff like *The Victor* and I remember being really fascinated by that stuff when I was a child. Then I put that to one side, but it came back when I saw the Iranian Embassy Siege in May 1980 on TV. … It wasn't that I made an immediate decision. … It all germinated slowly. There was also … boredom, you know. I was bored of my routine in the Infantry […]. I was really surprised by the response of a lot of people when I [*applied*]. A lot of my peers in the Infantry said, "You won't last. You'll be gone in the first night." Like my buddy went on it and he lasted six hours. But I hardened my mind to the point that I said to myself the only way that I'm leaving this is on the

stretcher. It was just sheer bloody mindedness. I was thinking, I'm going to

prove all these f***ers wrong. Unless I got a broken leg or broken arm or

something, like, I'm just going to do it: I'm going to be relentless, and I'm

going to do this, and I swore blind I'd prove everybody wrong (interview

2022).

Although this thesis engages heavily with Bourdieu, the above narrative,

like so many others I gathered, suggests a core problem with any effort to

uncritically transpose *habitus* to self-selecting social fields. In a well-cited article,

Elaine Power (1999: 48-48) argues, "Although the social structures embodied in

habitus do not *determine* behaviour, the individual is predisposed to act in

accordance with the social structures that have shaped her, because, in effect, she

carries those social structures with her. … The individual's primary habitus,

inculcated in childhood, tends to be more durable than the one or more secondary

habitus that may be learned later, as one takes on a profession or trade." Here

"childhood" explains *habitus* by giving it a backstory, a personal history. But does

the mental toughness described by the operator above come from reading comics

or some other, thus far hidden, childhood events? Here is another operator is

thinking broadly about broken individuals being attracted to the family-like

structure of a special operations unit:

I would say that, like, you know, I want to be careful about my words here.

I would say that many, not all, but many, have some sort of a hard

childhood behind them. I don't mean this is the strongest terms. I mean it

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could be hard like poverty, and it could have been hard to grow up without a father. There could be in many different ways the same sort of thing. I think it gives them resolve, you know. The guys working Costco don't have that. I would say that if you go back far enough, they're trying to act like, you know, it was as if other people would have seen them as being difficult, but maybe the person, the personality, like, was full of resolve.

It's strange, if we were to have a school reunion, some of the people I went to school with, a number of the guys, I think three of the guys, I went to school with are doing life for different, unrelated murders. One guy was a major drug dealer and was involved in the killing of a guy with a samurai sword in Australia. Life can be hard, and it was hard at one stage, and maybe you worked your way out of it, but it could become hard again, and I think that gives you a sort of resilience, and, like, you know there was nobody that broke you (interview 2022).

No matter how interesting though such backstories are, we have to ask: why start the story with childhood? Why not with a personality structure? The limited available scientific research on Special Forces operators indicated that personality type—shaped by the temperament you were born with, such as a proclivity for openness, conscientiousness, or aggression—plays an influential role. That said, there is very little data on childhoods, so one must be cautious about emphasising nature over nurture, or vice versa, on the presumption that personality structure and socialization are both involved. In fact, several interviewees asked me for my view on this topic, wondering if family ties to the

military, media imagery, innate dispositions, or all of these were involved in their decision to join the military. One Irish research participant indicated his view on the strongest variable by saying that his father was once asked by a visiting relative to characterize each of his children in a sentence. His father pointed to his brother and described him as all ways having a football close by, and he saw his daughter as always studying, while the future operator was always hiding somewhere close by in an effort to ambush guests. All this to say, the concept of habitus is illuminating but, following Bourdieu, it is only a lens on "an imprecise, fuzzy, woolly reality" (quoted in Wacquant 1992: 22-23). It is a useful but blurred lens.

But what of the Special Forces Selection process? Below, we take up the same soldier's story again:

I think there was thirty-six or thirty-eight guys on my course. When we started, we lost the very first nine within the first twelve hours. I started to make a marker every day, a mental marker to say, you know, there's only twenty-nine now, or another few just left and I'm still here. Then we're down to just twenty-six left, and I'm still here. I think five people finished the course, and I think three of us were accepted into units. … If I remember rightly at the time, it was purely attitude driven by unknown X factor points. … I survived and I got to the point where I was going to bed and kind of congratulating myself that I was still there. Then you went to sleep for what might have been, you know, four or five hours but felt like three minutes. You know you close your eyes and think I'm just becoming

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almost a robot. You know I have a very dark sense of humour, and I think that it had a lot to do with getting through. … They run you like for five hours, and you can get back to base, and you're just coming up to the gates of the unit again, and you're taking a deep breath and saying, "Okay, I made it," and they send you off again! I kind of just laughed (interview 2022).

Of course, Special Forces selection is not simply a matter of physical fitness and bloody-minded mental endurance. All of my research participants describe selection as the first screening test of a months- and often years-long process that tests and builds mental agility, teamwork, leadership, and an extraordinary array of practical skills. Another soldier had the following to say about the period towards the end of selection:

Thirty of them, or whatever number it was on the course, you know I couldn't even tell you their names. I don't remember what they looked like. If you don't make it, you just you don't exist. If you do survive, then you want to earn the respect that comes with being one of us: there's an immediate respect if you finish the selection, but then the process of belonging begins. Out of the whole experience, the thing was the importance of being relentless in pursuit of your goals. I learned that during selection, and it stayed over the many things over the years, the many big projects over the years, that I would never have been able to do. [*whatever the challenge*] I'll just break it down into bite-sized chunks and I'll start

dealing with the stuff that I can deal with, and the problem will become smaller.

[*Also*] leadership, it was absolutely instilled in me when I was in Unit 2. It didn't matter if you didn't like the guy that was put in the team. You have to reach an objective, and you respect their particular skill-set. You can't help it that everybody doesn't like everybody, but we have to all respect each other. … If someone else is falling down, falling back or is weak, you need to support them in making them perform well because they're part of the team, and they're owed respect and a chance. This is the socialization machinery like a selection. It's competitive in a good way, it searches the common characteristics of people for what matters in that universe, like resilience, like character. They're not necessarily big, they do not necessarily have to be strong (interview 2022).

So, the operators themselves recognize that they have passed through the gears of "socialization machinery". Selection is both an effort to sift for "imprecise, fuzzy" qualities that are nonetheless recognizable, together with quantitatively screening for preternatural athleticism—the body and the mind are screened, and the exact measuring of the body bolsters the more inexact tests of mental strength.

Inside the Socialization Machine

Prior to selection, as already noted, operators have already established military careers at which they excelled, at least physically. Nonetheless, successful

selection puts them in a milieu very different from the average infantryman or marine. As explained in Chapter 1, Special Forces emerged in their contemporary form in the 20th century as a set apart from typical hierarchy, rules, and appearance. Marching and saluting went out, and beards and stolen equipment came in. Mental and physical fitness for the mission—whatever the mission might be—was the core and not discipline in the Roman or Prussian sense.

For Marcel Mauss and later Michel Foucault, the military is the ideal type—though they never fully explore their own examples—of body/soul training. Foucault (1977) tells us that the military barrack resembles the school, hospital, and, ultimately, the panoptic prison, but he tells us little about the actual competencies developed in any specific military barracks. Mauss's "Techniques du Corps" seems immediately relevant, but his analysis also lacks specificity. He tells us,

> The techniques of the body can be classified according to their efficiency, i.e. according to the results of training [*résultats de dressage*]. Training [*le dressage*], like the assembly [*le montage*] of a machine, is the search for, the acquisition of an efficiency. Here it is a human efficiency. These techniques are thus human norms of human training [*dressage humain*]. These procedures that we apply to animals, men voluntarily apply to themselves and to their children. ... As a result, I could to a certain extent compare these techniques, them and their transmission, to training systems [*à des dressages*], and rank them in the order of their effectiveness (Mauss 1973: 77–78).

Mauss conflates efficiency and effectiveness here. Special Forces are deployed in small and lethally "efficient" units, but efficiency does not guarantee effectiveness, as shown by the desire to select for unnatural levels of resilience. Kinetic force is ideally delivered efficiently but it may just as easily be delivered as old-fashioned, brutal, and repeated hammer blows.

Moreover, while Mauss's focus on *dressage* allows us to appreciate how the body is trained to work within a cohesive fighting unit, the affect is dyadic: agent (soldier) and (military) structure, "man" and machine. Special Forces are trained to avoid choreographed behaviours and operate in small, agile units. The techniques of the body are integrated into a whole host of meticulous team behaviours, which I will discuss as "administration" and physical readiness below. These behaviours are in always-rebellious tension with the overall military structure.

Affecting habitus

According to anthropologist Gillian Tett in *The Silo Effect*, "A dedicated team of trained firefighters is likely to be better at fighting fires than a random group of amateurs" (2015: 28). Groups of trained specialists, however, tend to have their own group-like characteristics, behaviours, and downsides—for instance, defensiveness, inwardness, "my side biases," etc. Tett is interested in which organizational configurations are optimal for drawing out the best and minimizing the worst characteristics of teams. The organization and the individual are connected by "teams," and her effort is inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

Yet, see reads habitus as simply the shared "mental maps" that connect people to their physical and social environments. It is not possible to regard Special Forces teams in this cognitivist way (c.f. Tett 2015: 44-46, 93, 245).

In recent years, anthropologists have been delving into affect as a means to explore embodiment, and human/extra-human/non-human relationality. Affect, a concept that defies easy definition, has been the subject of caution from some anthropologists due to its potential for universalizing explanatory claims. However, for Rutherford (2016: 286-289), affect theory represents an interest in the pre-discursive realm of "felt bodily intensity" in the context of "unconscious responses to stimuli and potential perceptions." Interestingly, Rutherford, like many social scientists, including anthropologists, has not yet established a clear connection between affect and habitus. This persistent gap in knowledge, as highlighted by Stan Houston and Calvin Swords (2022: 1294), continues to pique our collective curiosity:

> It is self-evident that the human subject's (un)consciousness can never be limited to, or defined solely by, cognitions, schemas or thoughts. Embodied consciousness also encompasses social values and emotions. These complex dimensions of being fold into each other, forming a rich tapestry of visceral stirring within habitus. One's 'feel for the game' in any social situation will be triggered as much by deep-seated, intuitive perception as by primeval sentiment: fear, in the face of social threats to identity being just one example. The boundaries between the two become blurred in the frisson of critical life events or moments of significant meaning. Put

alternatively, we can say that emotion and thought are two interconnected types of disposition within habitus. They are shaped by meaningful day-to-day interactions in fields of various kinds. Over time, emotions collectivise as dispositions within habitus the same way as thoughts. However, we should add at this point that emotion and thought also interconnect and register with the body. Emotional affect, for instance, displays through the 'feeling body' in one's non-verbal countenance, corporeal posture and ambient style of movement. Body is soul—'soul body', according to the Irish poet, Derek Mahon. Gabriel Marcel's edict captures this sentiment well: 'Je suis mon corps' (I am my body).

Undoubtedly, future research will explore the overlap between Bourdieu's theoretical work and research on the pre-discursive arena of felt responses and perceptions. Here, I explore this arena empirically. In short, Special Forces teams deliberately train and "weaponize" the affective dimensions of teamwork.

From selection to socialization, Special Forces emphasize trust, adaptability, communication, and specialized training. These competencies are carried by operators into civilian life, but they have not been studied in sufficient detail (Cooper et al 2018). Teamwork is instilled from the very beginning of training. Candidates learn to rely on their teammates, trust their leadership, and work seamlessly together to achieve common goals. The crucible of training ensures that only the most cohesive teams emerge and ultimately serve together. Special Forces operators develop a unique group dynamic characterized by mutual trust, respect, and shared experiences. This cohesion enables them to operate

effectively in high-stress situations and fosters a deep sense of camaraderie. Operators forge strong bonds with their teammates, often describing their units as a second family. This strong sense of cohesion is essential for maintaining morale, motivation, and teamwork during extended deployments and challenging missions. Each team member understands when to lead and when to follow, depending on their expertise and the specific demands of the mission. This adaptability ensures that the team operates smoothly under any circumstances.

"Administration" is an important aspect of teamwork. Administration denoted looking after your kit and equipment, knowing that failure to do so may prove fatal to you and your team members. Lack of hygiene may brink on illness and an inability to participate in an operation. Poor weapon maintenance may lead to death. All of this may seem like common sense, but Special Forces operations elevate practical skills. Special Forces teams generally work remotely, only drawing on support from conventional troops and their resources as and when they are required. Operators, then, must be truly self-sufficient and multi-talented—builders, mechanics, cooks, and medics all rolled into one.

During an operation in a remote area, a Special Forces 'fire base' becomes a self-contained island. On a fire base, administration is everything, from eating to sleeping, with every act of maintenance or cleaning becoming part of a larger system. During an operation, movements are restricted, every conversation is by whisper, food is eaten cold or warmed by your body only. The operator will usually sleep with a pistol on their chest, a round in the chamber and the action de-cocked. The seemingly simple task of waking a sleeping operator is therefore dangerous, so a practice emerged whereby everyone wakes resting colleagues in a

specific, known way, such as gently shaking a particular leg. All this to say, the operators' habitus is unconscious in several ways.

A more obvious example of how teamwork competencies merge into "affect" is in the domain of counterterrorism and hostage rescue operations. In a hostage rescue scenario, a team will generally consist of six operators, as is pretty standard across the globe, and the objective might for example be a planned assault against a pre-determined and well understood objective. The team will generally engage in what is classed as a "Black Role" assault—this is when a team of operators will work to support other teams that will gain entry to the objective building or aircraft from multiple points simultaneously. The most famous example of this is the Iranian Embassy Siege in 1980.

Black Role assaults are meticulously planned and rehearsed. Floor plans and blueprints are utilized and availed of, and reconstructions and models of the building are built and used for rehearsals, depending on the objective mock-ups or the exact model aircraft are used to train on. Every door, window, and corner is replicated and drilled to exhaustion right up to the go-no-go command, even up to the pre-stage area, where we will use climbing ropes laid out on the floor to mark out the rooms and doorways. This recalls Gillian Tett's reading of habitus—the "mental maps" that connect people to their physical and social environments. However, we must attend to a critical affect-based nuance: the "breaching dilemma". Breaching denotes gaining access to the target. Considerations are many and varied but break down to three leading solutions: a) physical, basically turning the handle on the door or opening the window; b) mechanical, where various tools are used to bypass barricaded or locked entry points; and c) dynamic

or explosive, where a team will breach using petrol saws, air jacks, or explosives. No matter whether it is a), b), or c), everything is done as a team or as a buddy pair: You never breach a room by yourself, never hold a corridor by yourself, and never take a stairway by yourself. Every movement is covered by defence in depth or, in other words, by your buddy.

The pivotal role in the team is held by the shield man, a name that speaks for itself. This individual, supported by his number two, leads the team or the "stack" (the six-man squad) in a synchronized movement, constantly guarding against vulnerabilities, much like a snake with eyes along its body. Once the stack is formed, the shield man takes the lead, moving the shield forward into and along the corridor or into the room, one arm supporting the shield weighing over 40 lbs, while his other hand controls his pistol perched on top of the shield. He is followed by his number two, with a firm hand resting on his shoulder, as is the case for the rest of the team, with each member's hand resting on the shoulder of the man in front, their strong arm managing their weapon system.

This hand on shoulder is the instant method of communication between team members—no taps like in the movies: everything is done with a firm squeeze of the shoulder to the man in front or the thigh of the man to your rear. The squeeze travels forward to rear and back again, this non-verbal communication is drilled and exercised extensively. Hand signals are also used but the most important communication comes from the countless repetition of drills and movements between the team members. This is Mauss's notion of dressage by means of extended mind/bodies. One can imagine the impact on social bonding of training repeatedly to operate as a single organism, movements, and thoughts as

one, sense and feelings linked as if in many respects that your minds are were actually linked. Add to this fear of imminent death and the reality that avoidance of death requires trust in your fellow operators. And then there's death. J. Glenn Gray condensed all of this in a secetion of *The Warriors* (1959: 45), a passage applauded by Hannah Arendt. The gravity of the situation and the need for effective communication is what makes non-verbal communication so crucial in our operations.

> With the boundaries of the self expanded, they sense a kinship never known before. Their 'I' passes insensibly into a 'we,' 'my' becomes 'our,' and the individual fate loses its central importance. …
> Some extreme experience—mortal danger or the threat of destruction—is necessary to bring us fully together with our comrades or with nature. This is a great pity, as there are surely alternative ways more creative and less dreadful, if men would only seek them out. Until now, war has appealed because we discover some of the mysteries of communal joy in its forbidden depths. Comradeship reaches its peak in battle.

The result is a brotherhood rooted in the field, habitus, and forms of capital of military Special Forces.

Brotherhood

In recent years, because of the drive towards gender equality in international armed services, scholars have explored the social construction of masculinity in

military-institutional "warrior cultures" (e.g. Sion 2007; Hale 2012). Indeed, since the beginning of "masculinity studies," the military man emerged as the (often cartoonish) exemplar of masculinity (e.g. Arkin and Dobrofsky 1978). On the back of several scandals in military academies and recently in the Australian Special Forces (see ADF 2021), we have seen a focus on military initiations and "hazing." Most of this research has been carried out in military academies, training programmes, or other "accessible" sites, and much of it cites anthropological concepts loosely. Oddly, there is very little anthropological work on this topic, as noted by Gutmann (1997), and recently by Ferguson (2021). What work there is, including Ferguson's, tends to focus on trading blows with sociobiologists who hold that aggression and war-making are innate traits in male populations. Another issue is the specious claims made about men based on the loose and spongy category of "masculinity." As Ferguson admits, the category is inherently fluid, shifting, and prone to being used for specious claims, "Masculinity is a malleable category. … Within masculinity can be mixed and contrary themes, in both hegemonic and protest varieties, partly related to the specific demands of war-making" (2020: S121).

There is insufficient space in this work to engaged fully with these scholarly (and ideological) discussions. Importantly, the only major ethnography of US Special Forces, Anna Simons's, *The Company They Keep* (1997), eschews broad categories and instead focuses on the productive dialectic between exceptional individuality and remarkable team bonding in elite combat units. In line with this, and to advance my earlier discussion of affective habitus, I would also like to focus on how individuals are socialized into bonded "brotherhoods".

Here is one tier-one operator reflecting on hearing the early emphasis on brotherhood in post-selection training:

> I remember a particular boat assault and then hostage-rescue act like, you know, when … a senior NCO described, you know, what you need to do. "You need to look after your team!" You want us to look after each other and that's what you do: protecting your brothers! That way, *you know what you're doing is righteous,* because we are like in … concert. … I have a particular mind set today, and it takes me back to that day. I'm good people, because good people protect others. It's kind of simple, a simple message, a definition, and no matter what you do, the message is there (interview 2022 [my emphasis]).

Perhaps incorrectly, this operator brushed off discussion of initiation rituals as mere playfulness back at base. Instead, he noted that true bonding, prior to seeing action as a team, often took place in off-base bars and clubs when tough "locals" in search of respect tried to pick fights with operators "to prove themselves":

> [We] used to go, a lot of us, to a nightclub on a Wednesday night. Locals would like to "have a go" at [us]. I had a girlfriend, like you know, at the time, and she was a model, and if she was in the club with a friend, you know, there would be a lot of attention. But we were … very disciplined in a way. You know, you see lots of bar fights where everybody just runs and gets involved. But we would stand back and assess the situation, watch for

people on the peripheral. Fights look all uncoordinated but yet they're often coordinated. If those people wanted to play, we'd show them how professionals played. This created great camaraderie. … We were all interested to know if you're really a brother. Most people have to have a tragedy to know who their brothers are, like cancer … (interview 2022).

Others tell similar stories of bonding through brawls, and those stories are the stuff of reminisces in later life. The selection process is also a moment in life that operators and ex-operators will also return to, sometimes comparing their formative experiences to the (obviously) softer standards of today. And in later life, because missions are still classified, operators will tell stories of various "scrapes" in foreign countries. (Their experiences are often so wild that they would only make sense to other members of the Special Forces community). It should be clear, albeit implicitly thus far, to readers that secrecy is itself a bonding force of great significance. In short, brotherhoods are forged from fierce individuals who form fierce attachments to one another. Anthropologist Scott Atran explores the power of such bonds in this way:

> Many creatures will fight to the death for their close kin. But only humans fight and sacrifice unto death for friends and imagined kin, for brotherhoods willing to shed blood for one another. The reasons for brotherhoods—unrelated people cooperating to their full measure of devotion—are as ancient as our uniquely reflective and auto-predatory species (2010: x).

Elsewhere, he argues that brotherhoods tend to form with values close to their collective hearts, sacred values to be precise:

> Sacred values differ from material or instrumental values in that they incorporate moral beliefs that drive action in ways that seem dissociated from prospects for success. Across the world, people believe that devotion to essential or core values—such as the welfare of their family and country, or their commitment to religion, honour, and justice—are, or ought to be, absolute and inviolable. Such deeper "cultural" values that are bound up with people's identities often trump trade-offs with other values, particularly economic ones (Atran and Axelrod 2008: 222).

What does all this mean for a Bourdieu-inspired inquiry into Special Forces selection, training, and eventual, ideally successful, transition to civilian life?

Reflections on habitus

It is hopefully clear that the concept of habitus does illuminate many aspects of life in the Special Forces. On the one hand, we can see that habitus—if we read it expansively as embodiment, affect, and the value-led socialization of lasting brotherhoods—grounds the analysis. It shows that operator selection and training is not dressage for docile bodies, but rather a detailed, sometimes contradictory, specialized, and extraordinary process. On the other hand, a grounded analysis expands the concept of habitus, perhaps beyond its capacity. It is clear that typical

readings, such as Gillian Tett's in *The Silo Effect*, see habitus as being the shared "mental maps" that connect people to their physical and social environments (Tett 2015: 44-46, 93, 245; also Leander 2006), and are thus excessively cognitive. On the other side, Wacquant's account of boxers in Chicago (1998) is overly focused on single bodies *vis-à-vis* field and capital. My use of affect is a corrective to this also. However, it should also be clear that habitus is not a stable concept that can be put into a formula as per Leander (2006).

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The world of Special Forces is a space of relentless learning, of unyielding challenges, and potential failure. Upon completion of selection, the aspiring operator embarks on an additional barrage of learning and testing that spans

approximately one more year. Further training delves into specialist areas such as small unit special forces tactics, demolitions, advanced medical training and certification, advanced communications, counterterrorism, parachuting, and numerous additional core skills on a course known as continuation or skills training. Upon completion of the skills or continuation course, the operator is deemed to be "badged," or fully fledged as an operator. They have, however, now only placed their foot on the next rung of the ladder within the unit and are classed as a basic Special Forces operator. Here now begins the perpetual cycle of upskilling and specialization into one of the teams that make up a Special Forces unit, such as the maritime team of combat divers and boat handling, or the air mobility team, which focuses on parachuting and air delivery of personnel and equipment for operational purposes, the snipers or Sierra teams and the land mobility teams that deal with long-range patrolling and specialized transportation and overland delivery systems. This is not a "total institution" (Goffman 1976) in any meaningful sense, but, rather, a world of action, backed by specialized knowledge, and filled with various forms of "capital".

Chapter 3: Capital

We had just returned to our firebase in a remote conflict zone in Southeast Asia when word came down from our Tactical Operations Centre that a partner Australian unit needed help. It was unclear what had happened, but they had to be relieved from their post immediately. They were 1,737 meters up a nearby "unsecure" mountain. The task was formidable. Having been assigned the mission, my unit immediately examined the possible ways to reach the partner force. Every option was explored. Travelling on foot would, we were told by locals, take too long, at least a full day. We settled on being air-lifted to the mountain top in American built but New Zealand crewed Air Force "Huey," helicopters, some of which had seen action during the Vietnam War.

We plotted and tracked weather fronts, calculated the weight of the kit and equipment we would need, and the flight path. We crunched the numbers repeatedly. Might we be exposed to enemy fire? We decided to deploy in two helicopter teams, one acting as a taxi, while the other provided gunship "overwatch" with their side mounted M60 machine guns. The second helicopter would not carry a team but provide space to rescue the wounded or bring home the dead. Two trips to the top of the dangerous mountain would be required.

The first helicopter convoy successfully deposited a team on the mountain top, but before the pilots could make the next trip, the weather

closed in. The cloud cover was thick and low. Now we would have to walk.

Again, calculations were required, from the weight of kit and equipment to

the new route to be followed in bad weather. The following morning,

weighted down with kit, we set off up the sheer side of the mountain. The

climb was so steep that our knees constantly met our chests. Just like

during selection, everyone was in their own physical hell, yet we were also

fused as a unit, constantly watching out for one another, and scanning for

threats to the group.

I heard movement to my immediate front, the thudding and

thumping of feet with the snapping of brush. I signalled to the rest of my

team to "Stand To." Safety catches off, the rest of my fireteam took up their

positions. We lay there and waited, ready to shred whatever it was that was

closing onto our position. A dog appeared, a little white guy with a big

brown circle on his body. The dog looked startled and skidded to a halt in

front of me, nervously looking back the way he had come. Then a pistol

appeared in my line of sight, an arm, a man. It was the sniper from the

other half of our team. We had navigated to the camp, exactly to the camp,

in ferocious weather conditions, in under eight hours. Think of all the

sophisticated skills required to complete this dangerous mission and how

few of those skills are applicable in the mainstream civilian world.

– The author's memories of his own acquisition of "capital," 2023.

In the last chapter, we learned that the selection and training of Special Forces is a

striking example of elite professional socialization. We must be careful

generalizing from special cases. As shown, aspiring operators, already excellent soldiers, are passed through a "socialization machine," to quote a retired operator, which is finely calibrated to select for, and shape, a specific kind of person. As discussed, selection involves working on the body, identifying, and weeding out weak bodies, and weakness within the body—even the accidental weakness of random injury; there is no desire to recruit super humans; war is basic. Selection requires the aspirant operator exceed the normal threshold of fear, resignation, tiredness, and pain, until self-belief, resilience, comradery, and competition shine through.

In a broader Maussian context, the selection and training processes can be seen as efforts to fine-tune the body, treating it as an instrument. In this thesis, I draw heavily on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly the enlightening concept of habitus. However, I go beyond Mauss. As Anna Leander suggests, habitus is a person's resources, based on incorporated capital, and manifested in habits, interests, and choices, hexis, and doxa. These elements, in turn, shape the field and the habitus within it (Leander 2006: 7-8 passim).

A well-known example of *habitus* in social-scientific action is Loic Wacquant's study of a Chicago boxing gym, where he shows that training is so calibrated as to produce a near-perfect symmetry between the structure and the agent, embodiment in other words. However, as indicated, we cannot understand warrior training by referencing *habitus* alone. For Wacquant, the boxing gym is a socialization machine too, one which produces "entrepreneurs in bodily capital" (1995: 66), but he is interested in the cognitive dimensions too: boxing is the "exercise of an intelligence that comes into its own in communication with the

concrete and actual realities of its natural setting and object" (1995: 73). Training also demands the boxer "read" his or her opponent's body, tune in, such that fighting becomes like a violent, mindful dance. All of this spills outwards to the capitalist fight-world of belts and weigh-ins, purses, and prizes, and back inside into the body as a site of gender, racial and other codes of identity. Boxing is "the manly art," according to Wacquant, not because it promotes rugged individualism but because it requires "doxic submission" (1995: 88).

That said, yes, the Special Forces operator is trained to fight, but he or she is not trained to fight in one particular way—the boxer may favour a style of fighting, and know others, but they just box. The operator uses multiple weapons systems, and normally fights, sometimes against overwhelming odds, in a team, as part of a cohesive unit. Here is one commentator's description of training in advance of Operation Barras, the 2000 rescue of eleven British soldiers kidnapped by militia members in Sierra Leone: "Repeated rehearsal–running through the assault time and time and time again–helped drill the details and the routine into each man's head, and eventually movement, awareness, synchronicity and timing all became part of a ritual, a dance, an instinctive course of action" (Lewis 2005: 297). The boxer is trained to fight *as if* to the death, whereas the operator, like those who rescued the kidnapped soldiers, *is expected to be an agent of death*, as part of a highly attuned team of killers, who do their work on the hoof, overriding their programming to innovate as required. These are differences at the level of affect and technique, but go far beyond minor differences. The question, then, becomes, might we understand Special Forces in terms of "capital," and how might this allow us to think differently about Bourdieu's framework?

Here is Anna Leander's version of the key elements in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital:

> [*In*] order to make sense of the social world, it is useful to acknowledge that it is divided into relatively autonomous social sub-systems which follow their own "laws" and logic. These "laws" define what kind of positions persons will have in that specific field … in terms of the "capital" of different actors in a field. What capital is and how it is valued is itself defined by the field. Capital here is not money or property, or at least not only or necessarily. Capital is what is recognised as a resource in a specific field. Capital (economic, social, cultural or symbolic) is a "social relation", "a social energy". Hence in diplomacy, the NGOs world, the community of central bankers or of radical Islamists, different forms of capital confer advantages (2008: 17).

Of course, the world of Special Forces is a relatively discrete "field" which certainly has its own logic, and "laws," in some cases actual laws. But can we talk about specific forms of capital—cultural, social, symbolic, or economic—in that world?

Following Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital is the knowledge and skill needed to maintain one's social standing. For the Parisian intellectual it is familiarity with key texts, for the middle-class office worker it might be taste in film, familiarity with gadgets, or Instagramable holiday destinations—whatever it takes to conform to cultural expectations. For the Special Forces operator, cultural

capital may include massive quantities of precise knowledge of martial techniques and technologies, conveyed with studied humility, or with an aggressive problem-solving attitude. It might also be an unwillingness to speak on any such matters such as those just mentioned— "membership to a group"—conveyed through silence. Of course, humility, aggression, and technical knowledge, have often been associated with working-class life (see Wacquant 1995; Willis 1978), but class may be too blunt a tool to analyse the highly specialized and "selected" world of Special Forces. For Bourdieu, cultural capital may be embodied in dispositions and styles of thinking, and these may be institutionalized and rewarded, or certified by society, and objectified in things, symbols of cultural capital, thus converted into economic capital (see Bourdieu 1986: 242; see also Bourdieu 1984, 2018). All that said, class is a feature of military life, and has long been so. Therefore, here we must take a moment to consider the wider military class-capital relations before returning to Special Forces, who are embedded in yet separate from these relations.

Class action

One of the most illuminating social texts on military life and social class is the classic British movie *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943). This film, a moral tale about youth and aging, is so satirical that Winston Churchill attempted to have it banned. It features Major-General Clive Wynne-Candy, a character who embodies the stiff, rule-obsessed officer, thoroughly upper class, yet noble and heroic even in age. However, he is consigned to the past, as modern war

necessitates a meritocratic approach for victory. This historical context adds depth and richness to our discussion on cultural capital and social class in the military:

> Candy: I heard all that in the last war! They fought foul then - and who won it?
>
> German officer: I don't think you won it. We lost it -but you lost something, too. You forgot to learn the moral. Because victory was yours, you failed to learn your lesson twenty years ago and now you have to pay the school fees again. Some of you will learn quicker than the others, some of you will never learn it - because you've been educated to be a gentleman and a sportsman, in peace and in war. But Clive! Dear old Clive - this is not a gentleman's war.

The film captures something profound about military life today: war is organized by the forces of the state and so reflects the state, and yet it must also organize force efficiently and effectively, thus separating force from the state. The most perfect example of this is the use of Special Forces. As we learned in Chapter 1, instead of disciplined ranks, uniforms, rules, special operators are often bearded, dressed in whatever fatigues they are comfortable in, sporting their preferred weapons. As Maguire and Westbrook (2020) put it, it is as if the modern bureaucratic state recruits its own dark shadow to do the heavy fighting. But, before we investigate special operations units in more detail, what can we learn from studies of social class in the military? Here I summarize two cases, mainly

because the data are accessible, the British and US military, which are where several of my interviews served.

Nick Mansfield has shown that during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the British army reflected the social class composition of the time to a striking degree. However, junior officers often purchased their commissions, but newer technical regiments were unfashionable but needed and enabled promotion, so the energy behind social mobility ran against a culture of aristocratic and wealth entitlement. Common soldiers were often very poor or immigrant, such as the Irish, and therefore, to quote the famous word of the Duke of Wellington, "the very scum of the earth." The Royal Navy and Airforce emerged with even more rigid class structures which have, arguably, persisted more into the present day.

Recently, the British military embarked on a massive drive to diversify its ranks, with mixed, and sometimes counterproductive results. Today, the military is 90% white and 88% male, with most frontline personnel being from working-class or disadvantaged backgrounds. According to Simon Akam,

> all three services are still split into distinct commissioned and non-commissioned universes — between officers and soldiers, in army language. Each track features its own entry requirements and career trajectories. And this split is traditionally based on class: historically, officers were posh; the soldiers were not. … In 2019, 49% of Sandhurst [officer academy] direct-entrant cadets had attended fee-paying schools — whereas the equivalent figure for the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth was 36% (Akam 2022).

Because recruitment into the army is possible at 16 years old, the military has been criticised for targeting recruitment campaigns to Britain's most disadvantaged communities.[3] Debates are rolling on about diversity—though mainly gender and race not class—in the British army (see Akam 2021).

However, perhaps unsurprisingly, Special Forces complicate the picture. Many elite regiments have a culture that is meritocratic, and even more so the higher one goes up their tiers, and the tension with the officer class is "resolved" by treating them as interlopers, not saluting them, deferring to the sergeant instead. But this is not to say that class and rank play no role. On the contrary, officers in special operations units are charged with interfacing with the regular military hierarchy and the political realm. King paints an important picture of 22 SAS in this regard:

> Following the September 11 attacks, the SAS deployed to Afghanistan almost immediately to play a role in Operation Enduring Freedom … and an SAS squadron was deployed to assault a cave complex near Kandahar, where Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters were taking refuge. Having identified enemy fighters in the caves, the SAS assaulted the complex, using small arms and hand grenades. Although four troopers were wounded, eighteen Taliban were killed and forty were taken prisoner. The operation usefully illustrates the SAS's position in a new command structure. The assault

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[3] As of April 1, 2014, there were 1,570 youths under 18 years of age in the army.

squadron (Alpha 11), led by a sergeant, relayed its situation back to Zero

Alpha, the Special Forces operational control room located in Britain, via

satellite communications. Zero Alpha, in turn, reported to PJHQ and Geoff

Hoon, the defence secretary. It is important to recognize the extraordinary

contraction of command here. In contrast to the cold war, where the tactical

level was divided from the strategic by multiple layers and there was no

possibility of a sergeant having any access or even relevance to the

strategic commanders, there were only two layers of command between a

sergeant with a squadron of forty men in Afghanistan and ministerial level

in London (King 2009: 659).

Here the privately educated upper class officer is separated from working class

soldiers by competence, capability, and, importantly, function. The officers must

maintain the system in which the soldiers operate meritocratically. The system

works so long as everyone knows their role.

The US military has long been celebrated as classless, but this disguises a

deep stratification. Contrary to popular belief, and images of poor farm boys going

to war, the military draws disproportionally from the middle classes, especially the

lower middle classes (in 2016 over 60% of enlistments came from neighbourhoods

with median household incomes of $38,000 to $80,000). However, as Alair

Maclean (2011) has shown, the closer a service person is to a combat role the

lower their socio-economic status.

We must also recognize that the military is a "successful" melting pot for

immigrant ethnicities, most famously the Irish and German immigrants—estimates

suggest that one in every four continental soldiers during the Revolutionary War was Irish. Later, during WWII, Italians and Latinos were overrepresented. Post WWII integration efforts saw huge numbers of African Americans serve in Korea and Vietnam, and, arguably, birthed the civil rights movement. In 1971, the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute was created to "cope with the racial turbulence then afflicting the military" (Moskos and Butler 1996: 56). Today, there is still high minority and immigrant participation, but over 70% are white.

The tip of the spear is composed of soldiers from poor backgrounds whose capabilities are revealed in merit-based selection, training, and combat. They operate in a class-riven world shaped by an officer class, which leaves their cultural and class-based markers in the place.

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The call started and I was introduced to the panel, I was informed that it should run to a maximum of 50 minutes and that there would be one question asked by each interviewer who was an expert in the field that the question was based on. Easy I thought to myself, professional knowledgeable people asking relevant and well composed questions that would require an honest and analytical approach in response. I progressed along the panel and answered the questions, throughout the interview I felt comfortable, glancing at my watch I noticed that I was coming up on the 50 minutes and it was obvious that we would run over time, not an issue I thought to myself, there was no breaks or pauses, I answered all the

preceding questions well. And then one of the panel decided he wanted to go into my resume again, and so line by line the dissection started, he focused in on the military and PMC aspect and took a particular interest in my psychological state of mind at that time. Special Forces and Private Military Companies, the polar opposite of the United Nations and what they stand for, however in the back of my head I was thinking, equal opportunities and the best person for the job surely came first. And then it slipped, "When I was an officer in the" at this point I began to zone out a little, we were now an hour and twenty minutes into this final interview and a career officer turned NGO warrior was going to pick a bone with me about something that he never had the balls to attempt when he served in the military. It all came out, mental stability and killing people, one tracked mind etcetera. And then finally he popped his closely guarded ace in the hole. When I contracted in Iraq, I worked for a very famous company called "Blackwater". Blackwater have since become the way the West look at and judge all PMC's. Blackwater became known to be the worst of everything in regards to security contracting, all judged off the actions of a few and a flawed investigation.

I was then asked why would I have Blackwater on my application for the United Nations, was I not aware that worse than Special Forces, companies such as Blackwater were akin to working with the devil. Slightly taken aback I refocused myself and explained that the United Nations take pride in and espouse above all that their employees shall maintain the highest standards of, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, fairness and

incorruptibility. I explained that if I were to remove or indeed added to any element of my resume that I had not taken on the journey to where I was a as person at that moment then I had already broken some of the core values required to become a member of the United Nations. I went on to explain that not everyone in life was willing to stand behind every decision that had brought them to that point on their life but that I was (author's personal reflection on a "transition" job interview, 2023).

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Social capital, for Bourdieu, denotes the resources of membership to a group, or a network, which may be kinship based, or a more instrumental business network, for example. In a sense, social capital is the actioning of social relations to advance an interest. Associated with social capital, one finds symbolic capital, which may work to legitimize social capital. An example might be the symbolic representation of a group or network as powerful to the outside world—a candidate for the US presidency might, for instance, showcase their military record, indeed wear their uniform, to signal their membership of the community of veterans, and who have made "the ultimate" sacrifice—the invisible citizens of past times. It should be obvious, therefore, that forms of capital are important to our overall understanding of military life. We can see this from existing research on the topic, such as elite Canadian paratroopers:

Culture is a social force that controls patterns of organizational behaviour. It shapes members' cognition and perceptions of meanings and realities. It provides affective energy for mobilization and identifies who belongs to the group and who does not. As in the other army regiments, the Airborne had its own distinctive subculture, in which abstract ideals of brotherhood and harmony, love and union, sacrifice and cooperation, loyalty and discipline, were translated and formulated into concrete aspects of style. They were manifested through a variety of symbols and symbolic patterns, and created a definitive and specific pattern of work and life (Windslow 1999: 435).

Capital is also, as logic implies, central to understanding the transition of operators from the military to the civilian domain, and that there are important differences between Bourdieu's ideal conception and the empirical reality studied in this work.

What the operator knows

The Special Forces operator is a soldier trained to fight and work in support of other fighters. This baseline knowledge and skill is evident, to a greater or lesser degree, among soldiers since the first professional armies emerged. The Special Forces operator has knowledge and skill that exceeds the normal baseline to such a degree that they are a different type of soldier. To put it in perspective, let's use an analogy to sport: if an average man were to give boxing a go, they might at first attempt generate around 150 pounds of force per square inch (PSI) with a punch; a

professional boxer, on the other hand, can generate 1,200-1,700 PSI, the equivalent of being hit by a car travelling at 15mph. This stark difference in skill and capability is similar to the difference between a soldier and a Special Forces operator, the latter being the professional in this analogy.

In the realm of Special Forces, professional violence is not just about physicality. It's about strategic group action and a disciplined, historically informed approach. As Tacitus once said, it's about combining discipline and vigour in the legions. This is a principle that a retired operator, now in his 60s, understands and embodies:

> You know just because the other guy, the enemy, has a weapon it doesn't mean that he knows how to use it! We do. We train to fight people who will fight back, … adaptive training. This may be a crude way of describing what special operators do: we go into that room and switch over – it's not an emotional thing! – and that's the difference, like, you know, violence is usually an emotional thing, out of control, but we are kings of control. Instrumental aggression (interview 2023).

On top of this, the operator layers a whole series of specialist knowledge, and on top of that each operator will have particular skills that they have taken the time to develop, from diving to medical qualifications, to, perhaps, sniper skills. This acquisition of specialist skill might be understood best through analogy with taking a degree course (or Scouts with their badges). The operator first acquires foundational knowledge, then subject speciality, before picking advanced seminars

to bring depth and uniqueness to their programme of study. The operator does this in a "secret college" (Maguire and Westbrook 2020).

Although few "outsiders" have studied Special Forces, there is a large, though very specialized, internal social-scientific literature in the military. Unsurprisingly, one of the best-known studies of Special Forces is an Australian applied psychology paper on the practical matter of recruitment. Scott Gayton and James Kehoe (2015) argue that physicality, though impressive, does not determine selection. Rather, individuals who prize and display "teamwork" and "integrity" tended to be successful in selection. This study has been replicated in the United States, and Europe, with the addition of a capacity for and desire to engage in "problem solving" (e.g., Fornette 2023).

As one might expect, physical performance, display of desirable characteristics like teamwork and problem solving, together with having acquired the relevant knowledge and credentials from a "secret college), all combine to form "capital". Following Bourdieu (1984; 1986; 2018), we can see a special forces style of thinking that is institutionalized and rewarded, not so much objectified or marketable, but internally valorised. Building on Bourdieu's insights I would also point to how cultural capital acquires value by being forced upwards: inability to display cultural capital in the field of the Special Forces operator means instant dismissal—it may even be punished by death—and exemplary performance leads to leadership, and the respect of "brothers." Cultural capital here acquires value by being lifted up while failure threatens to punish you from below. Here is the older retired operator again,

I spent been two and a half years in [*the unit*], but yes that's nearly 35 or 36 years ago. But it's like yesterday to me. It shapes me now. It made me progressive, makes you ambitious, like, just being in a competitive organization like that surrounded by competitive people makes you competitive. I was restless, but the unit used that, and made me competitive, and even now I'm looking for new challenges to solve. … I could have looked for advancement to, like you know, whatever, but what I wanted was one of them, one of those guys who drove in or walked in the door, and they knew and we knew that we were the best. I loved this … the attitude.

Figure 6: Irish army Rangers celebrate after receiving their green berets on top of the Hill of Allen.

Secrets and Lies

In an important article on military-civilian life, anthropologist Birgitte Refslund Sørensen describes the "homecomings" experienced by Danish military staff on tour during the so-called War on Terror. She points out that secrecy is written into the professional life of a soldier, but there are numerous forms of "secrecy work" that extend beyond the formal and professional.

> Secrecy also crept into the domestic realm and affected intimate relations. Many spouses complained that while they desired information of the whereabouts of their soldier to reduce anxiety and feel a sense of shared presence across distance, soldiers could share little information. … As a consequence, conversations were experienced as artificial, with both parties seeking to extract messages and meanings that the words did not convey from the hour of receiving a call, the tone of voice, the rhythm of breathing, the length of pauses, and so forth. …
>
> Veterans are accustomed to carefully manage flows of information from their time in the military, and they know from experience that the ability to do so successfully has consequences for their opportunities, safety, and well-being (Sørensen 2015: s232).

This speaks to my experience of research with members of Special Forces teams but in ways much more intense than the example given by Sørensen (2015). Special Forces units train for unconventional warfare, counterterrorism,

reconnaissance, and other specialized missions. Service in any specialist unit demands an extremely high level of secrecy that may not be found within most other units of the line. Whilst it is true that secrecy and its various levels exist across the military for operational planning and communication purposes, Special Operations forces by the nature of their roles demand an even more grass-roots-implemented level of secrecy. The classification of secrets and sensitive information often involves different levels to control access and protect national security interests. Many special operations are conducted under NATO (or UK, US, etc.) "Top Secret" classification, meaning that revealing such sensitive information would be regarded as a "severe" threat to national security and the person revealing it could expect to be charged with an offence potentially leaving to a very lengthy custodial sentence. But this is not just a matter of operational detail, geography, purpose: Special Forces teams are also forbidden from discussing ("OPSEC") tactics, techniques, and procedures, even with adjacent or supporting units, except on a classified "need to know" basis. In short, Special Forces teams are more comparable to secret intelligence agents than to regular military personnel.

Secrecy affect in national security contexts is described by Daniel Ellsberg (1968: 59) in a famous exchange with Henry Kissenger during which he advised Kissenger on how to handle elevated security clearance:

First, you'll be exhilarated by some of this new information, and by having it all — so much! incredible! — suddenly available to you. But second, almost as fast, you will feel like a fool for having studied, written, talked

about these subjects, criticized and analysed decisions … without having known of the existence of all this information. … You will feel like a fool, and that will last for about two weeks. Then, after you've started reading all this daily intelligence input and become used to using what amounts to whole libraries of hidden information, which is much more closely held than mere top secret data, you will forget there ever was a time when you didn't have it, and you'll be aware only of the fact that you have it now and most others don't …. and that all those other people are fools. Over a longer period of time — not too long, but a matter of two or three years — you'll eventually become aware of the limitations of this information. … In the meantime, it will have become very hard for you to learn from anybody who doesn't have these clearances. You will deal with a person who doesn't have those clearances only from the point of view of what you want him to believe and what impression you want him to go away with, since you'll have to lie carefully to him about what you know. In effect, you will have to manipulate him. You'll give up trying to assess what he has to say. The danger is, you'll become something like a moron.

The effect of secrecy can be corrosive, especially on intimate relationships. Several interviewees recorded difficult home lives because of the nature of their roles, partly blaming the inability to share experiences, but only partly, as secrecy is entangled with much more. In this thesis, I will focus less on the corrosive side, because here I am focused on "capital," and more on the productive outcome—

greater bonding with those you can share with, your imagined community of brothers.

The Band of brothers

The key that unlocks the form of capital produced in Special Forces communities, and the value given to it, is located in how small group performance and cohesion translates from effectiveness to a network. This is the subject of the next chapter. Here, we must approach it in brief to fully understand the utility of Bourdieu's notion of capital.

The central problem here, the objection, might be that the field of the Special Forces is too small and too unique to analyse with a general notion of "capital". What does symbolic capital look like in a community that is largely hidden from view, "in the shadows," so to speak? I will resolve this by claiming that unit effectiveness is based on group cohesion—the band of brothers—and the intensity of this cohesion generates bonds that translate into powerful networks. In short, cultural capital over time becomes symbolic and even monetary, sometimes with downsides. The words of a recently retired operator will illuminate the issues:

> I have a friend. He was a former sergeant major in the SAS. 20 years in the game. He will get me a job, and I'll pass one to him. He works in a company over there [UK], and I'm here, and we have no contracts, so there's no evidence of collaboration on paper. But, along with a handful of people, three or four people, we keep handing work off to each other. If he can't do it, he will hand it off to those people, those three or four people. I

know lots of others who operate like that in the US Special Ops. It's kind

of a common thing across the board. It's a tool that I've used over the years.

… We know who we are … *this is my network.*

When strangers wish to involve themselves in this retired operator's

business affairs, he always "searches his head" for a former operator who might do

just as well. And when he encounters new business contacts, he "scans" them for

signs of military club membership. Membership is signalled by fluency in

specialized terminologies, such as 'OPSEC' (operational security) and 'ROE'

(rules of engagement), evasive answers to certain questions, like 'I can't discuss

that' or 'That's classified,' and, of course, an air of physicality. Membership is

confirmed by showing knowledge of other members, events, and experiences

shared in "the teams." This is all cultural capital, translating into symbolic capital,

possibly on the way to conversion into economic capital. All of this is rooted in

the cohesion of the band of brothers.

EE Evans-Pritchard's exploration of 'segmentary lineage' (see Evans-

Pritchard 1969) provides a rich starting point for our discussion. His model, which

is always more intricate and nuanced in reality than on the pages of ethnography,

illustrates the Nuer's kinship system. In this system, more distant segments of

relations gain importance in specific circumstances. Evans-Pritchard's work has

been widely accepted as a general theory, demonstrating how close relatives are

prioritized, for instance, in a conflict, with relatedness and shared values extending

outward as needed. This complexity is encapsulated in the well-known Bedouin

saying, 'Me and my brothers against my cousins, me and my cousins against the

world.' According to Marshall Sahlins, segmentary lineage is an adaptive social structure that is particularly relevant in competitive, conflict-prone regions:

> Segmentary lineage system is a social means of intrusion and competition in an already occupied ecological niche. More, it is an organization confined to societies of a certain level of development, the tribal level, as distinguished from less-developed bands and more advanced chiefdoms. Finally, the segmentary lineage is a successful predatory organization in conflicts with other tribes, although perhaps un- necessary against bands and ineffective against chiefdoms and states; it develops specifically in a tribal society which is moving against other tribes, in a tribal intercultural environment (Sahlins 1961: 323).

The key here is to pick up on two elements: there is structure and war-like qualities (the "band") and it is composed of relatedness that is gendered and may be genetic or resemble genetic relatedness in its depth ("brothers"). These are the elements picked up by anthropologist Scott Atran, in his broad project to understand violence, especially organized violence by humans – real and imagined brotherhoods (after all, organized violence is still a male-dominated realm of life). As Atran explains,

> Many creatures will fight to the death for their close kin. But only humans fight and sacrifice unto death for friends and imagined kin, for brotherhoods willing to shed blood for one another. The reasons for

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brotherhoods—unrelated people cooperating to their full measure of devotion—are as ancient as our uniquely reflective and auto-predatory species" (Atran 2010: x).

Moving the discussion from crude evolutionism, he zeroes in on the role of sacred values:

> Sacred values differ from material or instrumental values in that they incorporate moral beliefs that drive action in ways that seem dissociated from prospects for success. Across the world, people believe that devotion to essential or core values — such as the welfare of their family and country, or their commitment to religion, honour, and justice — are, or ought to be, absolute and inviolable. Such deeper "cultural" values that are bound up with people's identities often trump trade-offs with other values, particularly economic ones (Atran and Axelrod 2008: 222).

In the case of Special Forces, there is a wide global community of operators in a world of civilians. Inside, there are "teams," bands of brothers held together like close relatives, and their relatedness is built on quasi-sacred values demonstrated by commitment to each other. But how does this translate to civilian life?

Chapter 4: Transition

I decided to leave the Special Forces in haste and did so for all the wrong reasons and with little idea about what I would do next. Inside the world of Special Forces, I was a highly qualified and experienced professional; outside, I was unknown, a child lost in an unfamiliar world—in the weeks after I left, I had to ask a friend for guidance on something so simple as booking a dental appointment. More than anything, I felt self-conscious and exposed. ... And yet, I was also a ghost: for over a decade, I worked in secret, so I had no CV.

A friend set me up with a job interview with a security company. I bought a suit. Prior to the interview, I sat in the waiting area between a teenager and an older man who smelled strange. Holding my ghostly CV, I felt exposed again. Every muscle, every sinew of my body screamed at me to get up and leave that godforsaken waiting area and the strange beings who inhabited it. To keep my body planted in that chair, I reverted to imagining I was redoing Special Forces selection—the part where they interrogate and torture you.

I got the job, not that it was a "good" job, a start. My goal now was to put tangible experience on that blank CV. I kept thinking that being a Special Forces soldier in civilian life is like being a sailor in the desert. However, it seemed to me that I could never turn away from my past. Years later, I sat in the shade of a tree, chatting with African villagers, trying to understand the local politics and dangers. I was there on behalf of a

multinational company rather than a nation-state, doing much the same

work, but this time as the manager.

– The author's memories of transition, 2024.

So far, this thesis explored how Special Forces soldiers enter a military "socialization machine." They excel there when others struggle, and they elect to attempt an even more challenging selection process: they attempt to enter the elite world of Special Forces. Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital are illuminating. We have thus far learned something of the unusual international field in which "teams" operate. We have learned that during selection and training, a long and torturous process, the aspiring operator is shaped by the body-and-mind-focused culture of excellence and how they, in turn, contribute to this trained, skilled world. The operator's skills, heightened senses, movement, and coordination with others in their "brotherhood" form a bodily *hexis* of "incorporated capital." As a character in a popular film tells a fictional operator, "Son, you are a weapons system!"

This thesis has also delved into the crucial role of capital in military life, particularly the formation of resources, such as networks. In this chapter, I direct our attention to the transition phase, where networks play a pivotal role. As Anna Leander aptly points out, "When a person enters a new field whose doxa is not yet reflected in the habitus, behaviour is bound to miss the many taken for granted, unwritten rules of that field and consequently appear clumsy and ill-adjusted, a 'Don Quichotte condition' or hysteresis" (Leander 2006: 8). My own experiences, as shared above, serve as a testament to this. I am not alone in this observation.

Here is a former operator, now a successful company manager, who echoes these sentiments:

You need to understand that from the moment you leave, you have gone, you've gone and you're not going back. You were in a club of X-Men, but you can't wear the uniform anymore. It takes people generally two or three years to make the transition. It's true: some people do it easily, like J____. He's a former deputy director of intelligence in this country, and he does some risk assessment stuff. But even from him, or me—we came out at the same time—you know, the moment you left, you left, and now nobody cares.

For me, it's a very visceral memory: I packed my things, and I walked out of the gates of the unit's building, which was my home for years. I remember thinking about this safety blanket that I had, a blanket of protection, and brotherhood. And, of course, you have a salary every week, and all these people here who I care about. Now, I'm walking away from it all. "It's behind me now." "Your future is in front of you," I said. … It must be like being a premiership footballer, or on the Olympic team, because you were this one thing, then, while you are still very young, you have to become this other thing.

I'm walking away, and I look over my shoulder and my home is disappearing, then gone, but I must keep walking … (interview 2022).

This chapter, therefore, asks: What are the challenges faced by former operators as they walk away from one world and into another unfamiliar world where a different habitus is expected, and where different forms of capital—social and symbolic—circulate in new fields? How is transition experienced? What do they rely upon during their (ideally successful) "transition?"

The transition literature

As noted in the introduction, military to civilian "transition" is typically defined as "the period of reintegration into civilian life from the military and encapsulates the process of change that a service person necessarily undertakes when her or his military career comes to an end" (Cooper et al 2018: 157). There is a large social-scientific literature on transition that emphasises adjustment challenges and negative outcomes, such as trauma (PTSD), serious mental health problems, substance abuse, crime, and domestic violence (e.g. Higate 2001; Comacho and Atwood 2007; Bergman et al 2014; Cooper et al 2016). (Importantly, veterans are overrepresented in workplace mass casualty events—especially as "active shooters"—but, strangely, this has not been properly studied). But, so far, there has been little attention to factors that determine successful transition.

Several recent studies conclude that successful transition is a matter of "cultural competencies," but the term culture is deployed without analytical precision. Moreover, other social-scientific studies worry about the excessive power of "culture" in the form of informal networks and guilds, which may well be the source of the competencies that lead to success. In truth, scholarly discussion about the transition from military to civilian life is dominated by

anthropological concerns and disciplinary concepts—most obviously culture and its synonyms—but no reference is made to anthropological theory or ethnographic research.

An interesting example is provided by James McDermott's *Old Soldiers Never Die* (2007), which studied the transition of regular soldiers, sailors and airmen after they completed a full military contract of at least twenty-two years in the military and thereafter successfully undertook a transition to the private sector utilizing and adapting the skills that they had gained and honed over the course of their military contracts. Clearly, much of this kind of research is concerned with veterans in societies with large and active militaries, such as the United States, Canada, and European countries such as the United Kingdom. It is not difficult to see why these topics are matters of concern. Nation-states have unique cultural and symbolic responsibility for veterans, and transition from contexts where the organized use of force is normal to civilian contexts where safety is expected as normal distinguishes military to civilian life transition from other transitions, say university student to public employee, civil servant to private sector worker, etc. Therefore, because of the uniqueness of the level of responsibility involved, and the sharpness of transition, together with the dangers of negative reactions, societies are concerned with evidence of negative outcomes. Former military staff are it seems very likely to experience problems such as trauma, risk of homelessness, substance abuse, crime and domestic violence. Commenting on just the issue of mental health, especially suicide risk, Holliday et al note,

Within the United States (U.S.), suicide remains a significant public health concern, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently reporting it as the tenth overall leading cause of death. Risk for suicide is especially pronounced among U.S. military personnel and veterans, among whom adjusted suicide rates have, at times, outpaced suicide rates in the general U.S. non-veteran adult population. As such, preventing suicide among military personnel and veterans remains a top clinical priority of the Departments of Defence and VA (2020: 2).

Risks such as the above are attributed to a variety of factors, from PTSD arising from battlefield experience to the closed fraternity culture of military service (see Camacho and Atwood 2007). But what factors are at play in the majority of cases that result in successful transition? Recent studies argue that we must pay attention to transition as a "cultural" matter of "competences" (see Cooper et al 2016). Bergman, Burdett, and Greenberg (2014) describe transition as ''reverse culture shock'' and grant this process huge importance. But what is meant by culture in this new wave of research? According to Cooper et al (2016: 158-9),

> Contemporary social theory has yet to fully consider how culture and cultural practices may persist when a service person transfers to a different social context, and conversely, how cultural adaptation may take place. … Scholarship within military sociology has explored varied aspects of military culture including the processes by which recruits are socialized into it, the gender ideologies which sustain it, and the influence that culture

has on the identity formation of previously familiar environment. … the transformation that civilians go through when becoming a member of the Armed Forces. Through the process of basic training, new recruits enter a forced ''separation'' from civilian life to make way for a strong identification with the military organization and culture.

The socialization of the recruit into military culture has been studied for some time, but the study of transition, which is equally cultural, is less well understood. Cooper et al 2016 describe it as a "priority" in the research literature. They explain that in order for veterans to have successful transitions they must "creatively adapt their behaviours to develop cultural competence in civilian life" (2016: 163). But what does this look like exactly? In the research literature, "culture" and "separation" are cojoined—much like Eric Wolf's old complaint about people who see human societies like billiard balls on a table, with each hard-shelled entity forming a unique "culture," here we have an old-fashioned idea of cultural integrity resurfacing.

In anthropology, this line of research is followed by the late Brigitte Refslund Sørensen (e.g., 2015; see also Sørensen and Ben-Ari 2019). Drawing on her long-term and large-scale anthropological project with Danish veterans, Sørensen (2015) describes the return of Danish soldiers from international operations to unsettling "home comings". "The certainty previously provided the soldier by rank, function, and mission vanishes" and new "social identities" have to be forged,

While the outcome of negotiations of identity is never predictable, the stakes are exceptionally high for people who—like the veterans—are embedded in morally contentious fields, something that makes issues of secrecy, disclosure, concealment, silence, and deception particularly pronounced in storytelling. … Rather than being a rite de passage, home-coming events mark the beginning of an extended homecoming process with ongoing struggles for veterans to find themselves and their place in the civilian social world. Conventional understandings of homecoming as reintegration into a familiar world, maybe aided by treatment, rehabilitation, and re-qualification, fail to capture this search for new social existences and the consideration of and experimentation with different possible identities (Sørensen 2015: s232).

Here Sørensen's work echoes familiar tropes of war and homecoming, echoing down through the ages at least since the difficult return home of Odysseus in Homer's *The Odyssey.* The "shock" of the new yields to a long-term, generally uneven integration process.

But Sørensen's approach is overly neat, at least for the purposes of this thesis.[4] As already shown, or indicated, Special Forces operators do not have one,

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[4] This is partly explained by her ethnographic material having been collected in Denmark, which has a modest military history, through—hence her research project—it played a small role in the recent conflicts in Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. During the "forever war" in Afghanistan, Danish soldiers supported

single, and character-shaping military adventure in a faraway land; there is no homecoming per se, and certainly no parade. The operator, instead, works in professional silence, on tour after tour of duty—"rotations." War is not, therefore, something that has happened in the past and now must be overcome. War is work (in the shadows). So, the operator is not so much institutionally and socially elsewhere during their military service and now must be integrated, as is the case with ordinary soldiers and sailors; rather, they live in a parallel world from which they can never fully return. Such differences matter.

Transition: Bodies Broken and Breaking

It is clear, therefore, that the literature on transition is dominated by studies of unsuccessful transitions. This is expected. PTSD, suicide, domestic violence,

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the British command in the Helmand province. (The Danish Jaeger Corps or "Huntsmen Corps" is a 150-strong unit that occasionally trains with Tier 1 units and gave a good account of itself in all recent theatres of operation). However, that said, Denmark has a problematic relationship to the projection of force; and mainstream Danish society has a powerful, cohesive sense of societal values, with a strong sense that state "rules" are social norms. Interestingly, my interlocutors generally came of age in social contexts where local social rules did not map onto societal rules. Sørensen makes the Weberian assumption, for instance, that violence is a matter for the state, and it is socially forbidden. Not so for the social contexts that produce operators.

violence in general, crime—these are all deadly serious "negative outcomes" (e.g.

Higate 2001; Comacho and Atwood 2007; Bergman et al 2014; Cooper et al

2016). (Some estimates suggest that one in ten members of the UK's prison

population are former members of the armed forces). However, there is a risk of

'pathologizing a population, 'a term used to describe the process of defining a

group of people as abnormal or pathological, which can be detrimental to

individuals and society. While addressing these issues is important, we must also

strive to understand the factors contributing to a successful transition. What is

most interesting to me is the absence of research on the precise variables that

would generate a successful transition, if indeed "success" can be measured with

precision. In the absence of studies that uncover precise variables, the literature is

filled with blank spaces and "black boxes" such as "culture" and "context".

We might return to Brigitte Refslund Sørensen's work precisely because it is

rooted in long-term ethnographic fieldwork and sensitive to life's messy,

sometimes contradictory, and complex realities. For all this sensitivity, Sørensen's

work foregrounds an image of the veteran as broken, at the point of breaking, or at

least prone to breaking.

Sørensen knows that military service involves the production of habitus

(read as "an embodiment"), which, she argues, sets a hard pathway into civilian

life: the body disciplined, trained, sometimes abused, is not "fit" for some roles,

not others (see also Higate 2001). She conjured a cartoon image of the veteran:

scarred, tattooed, possibly maimed, joints aching, yet still craving action and

comradery, but only able to capture past glory in tales of heroism and pain told to

others like them. Rather than unpack this dark image, Sørensen pivots to a

discussion of war and media before turning to the self-selecting groups of veterans who form support networks, or even biker gangs, all efforts to establish "embodied continuity," and similarly the extreme pastimes that veteran sometimes engage in to recapture the excitement of the past. All of this to say, Sørensen is, I am arguing, correct in foregrounding the military production of habitus ("embodiment"), which, I also hold, sets an optional path into civilian life. I am interested, in the case of Special Forces, in how field, habitus, and capital produce a cultural repertoire, or competencies, that melds with powerful networks. Empirical details will illustrate the argument in this thesis.

Follow the body

So far, I have taken care to show how the operator's habitus and sense of "brotherhood" is not just a mere association, but a crucial element that is forged in selection, training, and active duty in a specific field of "incorporated capital." It should be no surprise, then, that transition is registered at the level of the body. The member of the brotherhood, so attuned to his "buddies," leaves a specialized, secret world, and must navigate a new one. Several interviewees, as already noted, recall the visceral moment of packing their belongings and leaving "home" for a second time in their lives. As noted several times, transitions are a universal experience in human life—anthropologists think of rites of passage, but one may also consider moving job or country, becoming a parent, the death of a loved one, being fired or just quitting, or an unfortunate, life-changing accident—but here we are zeroing in on a dramatic one of great significance to society. The athlete whose sporting career suddenly ends will undergo a remarkable transition, but they

generally do not hold national security secrets, continue to be a potential resource to the state, or pose a mortal danger to society. The transition here is dangerous and dramatic: "[Y]ou were this one thing, then, while you are still very young, you have to become this other thing."

The body, as expected, is a key player in the operator's transition. Through sixteen recorded interviews and dozens of informal discussions, many of my interlocutors described acute physical discomfort when attempting to enter a new field, or—and we will revisit this later—the relative ease of transitioning into an adjacent field such as "security." Indeed, the two patterns are intertwined as we shall discover. The accounts from ethnographic interviews below vividly illustrate this and are categorized under loose qualitative headers: I will highlight the shock experienced when encountering the habitus of a new, unfamiliar field; and the magnetic pull exerted by the familiarity of an adjacent field and the network access provided by the "brotherhood."

The shock of the new

Although it is by no means a clear pattern, several interviewees who described themselves as unprepared or without a "plan" for transition also described departing the barracks for the last time in visceral ways. They also described feeling lost, then having a visceral experience during their first job interview process, from preparing a CV – several asked friends to help them with "buzzwords" and imagined checklists—to initial interaction. As one former "teams" member put it, "This guy who interviewed me talked in riddles. … F**king riddles!" Several interlocutors describe a sense of confusion and

frustration when faced with the circuitous sentences and semantic vacuity of the middle-class English of contemporary office culture; they implicitly contrasted this with the clipped, clarity-focused yet acronym-filled style of communication in the military. However, more than this, the body reacted for this sub-group of interlocutors, for instance:

> It was all a bit of a bit of an eye-opener for me. I had computer skills, and things like that. But I really had to focus on learning to be patient with civilians because I didn't, initially, you know, having been in the Army for such a long time, I don't really know. And I still to this day, don't know many civilians, you don't know a lot and you have to, you have to be a bit more gentle on them than you would in the Army, and I think you and you have to realize that. You can piss them off so easily. So, it's learning to be a civilian. And adapting the skills I had and into the civilian world. And I think I think I also made a conscious effort. Once I began, I was lucky, I suppose. But, at the beginning it was hard to not demand speed, clarity, f**king clarity! I would have to physically restrain myself (interview 2023).

When I delved into these experiences, they revealed a peculiar similarity, with the former military personnel, often referred to as 'operators' in this context, describing their transition to civilian roles. They found themselves in a new environment, having to restrain their military habits—sometimes consciously reminding themselves to avoid using military jargon or even saluting—while

sitting across an interview table from a very different type of professional: "[The] kind of people that I'm supposed to fit in with? If you're not, I mean, already one of them, they're sort of the same: They're very vanilla" (interview 2023). In the stereotype: paperwork obsessed, unrealistic, slow speakers of circuitous sentences. Regularly, whether applying for roles in NGOs, private companies, or in public sector roles, they described interactions with individuals who seemed to them "incapable," "slow," "lacking confidence," "I wouldn't put them in charge of the toilets!" Of course, the temptation here is to read cyphers of "masculinity" into this—an encounter with "feminized" office culture that operates by different expectations and social "codes" (e.g. Bourgeois 1996), but these interactions were never discussed in explicitly gendered ways. If anything, there was a comment on bureaucratic culture, NGOs, corporate, and public sector, in organizations that abutted the technical or regional expertise of former operators, from NGOs seeking employees in conflict zones to agencies such as the UN. Former operators saw these organizations in their world but were struck by their employees' distance from the ground level—a critique that numerous anthropologists have leveled.

Several former operators spoke of applying for roles in the United Nations and the particular horror of encountering former military interviewers who were also judged as "incapable," "slow," "lacking confidence," but who they also suspected of bias against former special forces, who would easily outshine their symbolic capital. Others spoke of an increasingly hostile attitude to former military: "You sense negative connotations attached to you being former military and specifically having the former Special Forces background going into such an

organization because, you know, they rely on the military and former police and things like that, but object to them morally. Imagine that: you get carried around on the back of the people you object to!"

During interviews, interlocutors tended to gloss over their early days in a new job in a new field, skipping to an eventual moment of "success" or a decision to move on. The general, impression, however, was of military bodies that followed the former operators into civilian life. The affect was, sometimes at least, hysteresis (see also Rutherford 2016; Wacquant 2006). In the context of military-civilian transition, hysteresis can be understood as a lag or delay in the adaptation of the individual's body, senses, and reactions to the new civilian environment. This term is often used to describe how history, or prolonged events, affect something even after the event has passed. In the cases of initial transition discussed above, the job interviewers were quizzing a potential office employee whose body, senses, and reactions were still at war. The interviewee was invested in the process, but their body lagged behind.

Contrary to Anna Leander (2006: 8), however, this is not closely associated with the "Don Quichotte condition," when an individual operates with noble if delusional beliefs about the world and their own abilities to act upon it—according to Cervantes (1967: 39), Don Quixote is a gallant madman … a combination madman who has many lucid intervals." Instead, in the cases here, the knight sees a "vanilla" world in technicolour, as filled with purpose, potentially dangerous, possibly meaningful, but the people inhabiting it see only bureaucracy, routine, endless process, and discourse. Former operators are fond of stories about reality

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crashing in on NGOs, corporate, and public sectors, evacuating employees from dangerous situations, and having to "take charge" in a "real crisis."

However, for all of this, most interlocutors did not stray far from home. Most stepped from the military to the adjacent "field." Others stepped further but soon returned to a more comfortable position. Justified by practicality, serendipity, rational choice, or sentiment—feeling out of place—security is the preferred home of the former operator, and the operator's network is a vital resource in this regard.

The pull of the familiar

Of the former Special Forces interviewed, many recalled transition in terms like the UK based interviewee below:

> I served in 22 SAS. … I deployed a couple of times in Iraq and
>
> Afghanistan. …
>
> I mean, once you get to a certain age, you know, … you're, you're not, you
>
> cannot stay in the same squad anymore. So, you're going to be, then, out on
>
> one of them wings, or you're going to be doing something else. But I
>
> thought, wow, what's the point? … So that the transition, then, that
>
> decision was more kind of it was based on time served. … To be honest, I
>
> didn't really plan a lot. I considered a couple of things. I did university so
>
> considered going into teaching and maybe, believe it or not, considered
>
> going into law. And then obviously as you start talking to people about it
>
> closer your time, but there's not a lot of information out there, unless you
>
> talk to people who are already out. … When I came to the end of my time,

there was a certain person I was so told to go and talk to, and he straight

away gave me a job. And I met this guy. And he says, "This is what's

available. Do you fancy this or that?" I just sort of drifted into a job.

Straight away, as soon as I left (interview 2023).

As another former UK-based operator put it,

It was actually networks within the regiment. So, there was other guys,

obviously, I wasn't the only person getting out. And you have another guy.

In fact, another guy came up to me, he was getting out about the same time

as me or just got out before me. So, he was already out. And I think we met

up. I don't know, we met in the bar or somewhere in town, I can't

remember. And he said, "Hey, what you going to do when you get notice?"

"Wherever!" He goes, "Oh, yeah, well we're looking for good lads, big job

in Algeria?" I didn't really have a plan, and he was, like, "We're all going,

all the lads" (interview 2023).

At this point, before returning to the nuances of first-hand accounts, it is useful to

give some loose data to illustrate the striking pattern.

The Network

Undertaking this dissertation, I encountered a unique set of challenges. Drawing on

my personal networks—honed through my professional training in the UK and

Ireland, and my collaboration with numerous Tier 1 teams across various operational

theatres — I identified potential participants. While many were willing to engage in conversations, the prospect of being recorded posed a significant hurdle. Despite these challenges, and in the face of a two-year plus global pandemic, I was able to secure fifteen individuals who agreed to a comprehensive recorded interview process, including a formal recorded session and a follow-up fact-checking interview.

As readers delve into this thesis, they will have noticed the extensive use of the interviewees' words. During the write-up stage, the interviewees' narratives brought to light a significant aspect of the thesis: former Special Forces operators often find solace in shadow networks that facilitate their transition, yet these very networks can also restrict their potential.

Figure 7: Research Participants by Unit, Country, Time Served, Location, Current and Previous Role, and Interconnectivity II

| UNIT	Country served	Time served	Current country	Current job	Previous jobs	Full time and/or reserve	Cross networking
SAS	UK	34	UK	Risk Manager for international O&G company	Close protection, military instructor	FT&R	3
SBS	UK	22	Kenya	Company owner	Corporate risk manager	FT	3
ARW	Ireland	26	Spain	Company owner	PMC security contractor, Close Protection	FT	7
ARW	Ireland	34	Ireland	United Nations	Military	FT	5
SBS	UK	10	UK	Security advisor television and movies	PMC security contractor, Close Protection, personal fitness instructor	FT	6
SAS	UK	7	NI	Consultant (Deceased)	PMC security contractor, Close Protection, window cleaner	Reserve	5
4 RHFS	France	30	France	Security consultant	Close protection, bar manager, sales rep	FT&R	6
4 RHFS	France	32	France	Security consultant	Close protection, building and construction	FT	5
ARW	Ireland	10	Spain	Company owner	PMC contractor, business owner, police officer, security consultant, foreign military trainer, private investigator	FT	16
2 Commando	Australia	15	S Africa	Risk Manager international NGO	NGO regional manager, foreign military trainer, aviation advisor	FT	3
1 RPIM	France	15	France	Risk Manager international software company	Close protection, risk manager, foreign military trainer	FT	4
ARW	Ireland	22	Ireland	Risk Manager television	PMC security contractor, close protection, television personality, author, motivational speaker	FT	7
ARW	Ireland	23	Ireland	Risk Manager UHNW family	Close protection, financial advisor, television personality, UHNW family protection liaison, motivational leader	FT	7
US Navy Seals	USA	12	USA	Foreign military trainer	PMC security contractor, business owner, foreign military trainer, inventor, government contractor	FT&R	3
ARW/1st SOFD-D	IRL/USA	35	USA	Media personality/instructor	PMC security contractor, author, instructor	FT	6

The fifteen recorded interviewees are broadly representative of the overall group of over forty individuals with whom I had contact, with "contact" ranging from informal conversations to longer unstructured discussion of my thesis topic. The pattern that emerges when one looks at the profiles and attributes is striking, and easily visualized, as below:

Figure 8: "A Security Network"
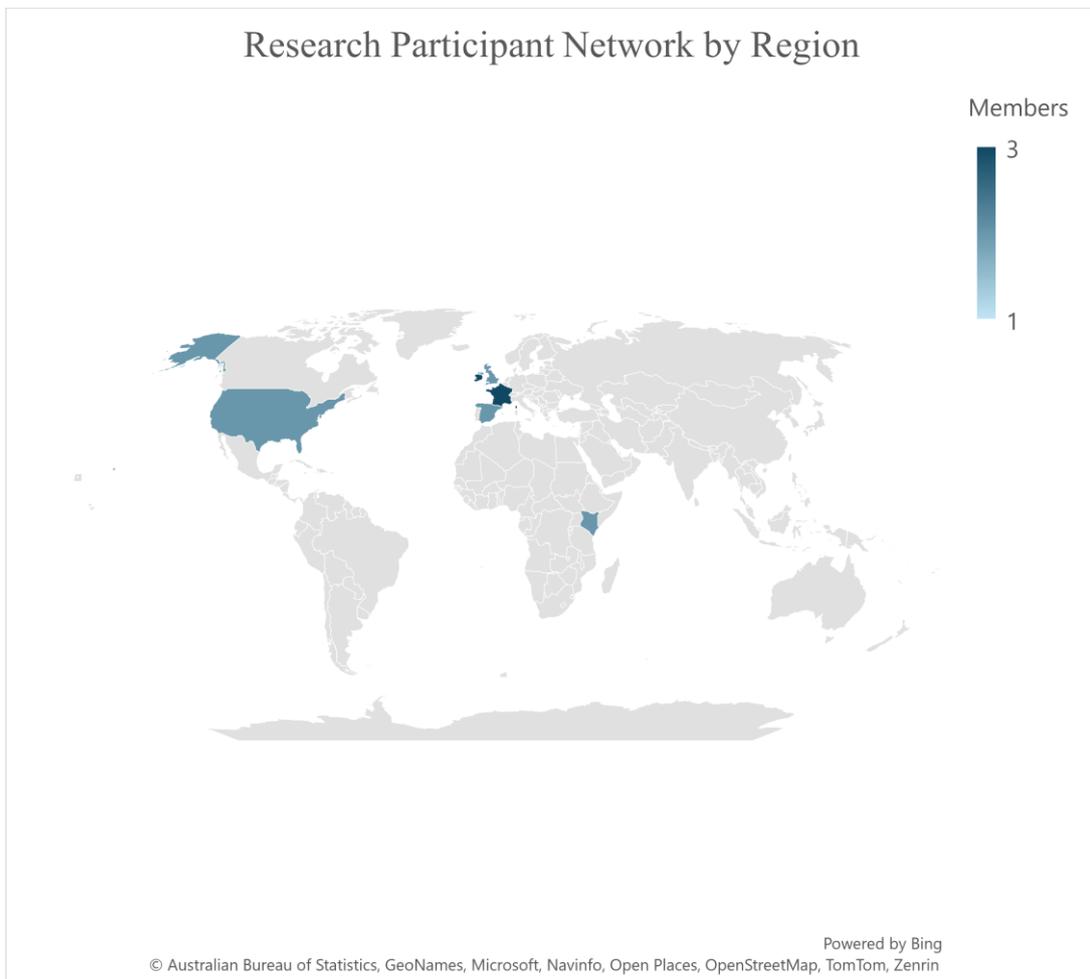
This geographically specific network is active in a small number of security sub-fields.

Figure 9: "The Security Field"
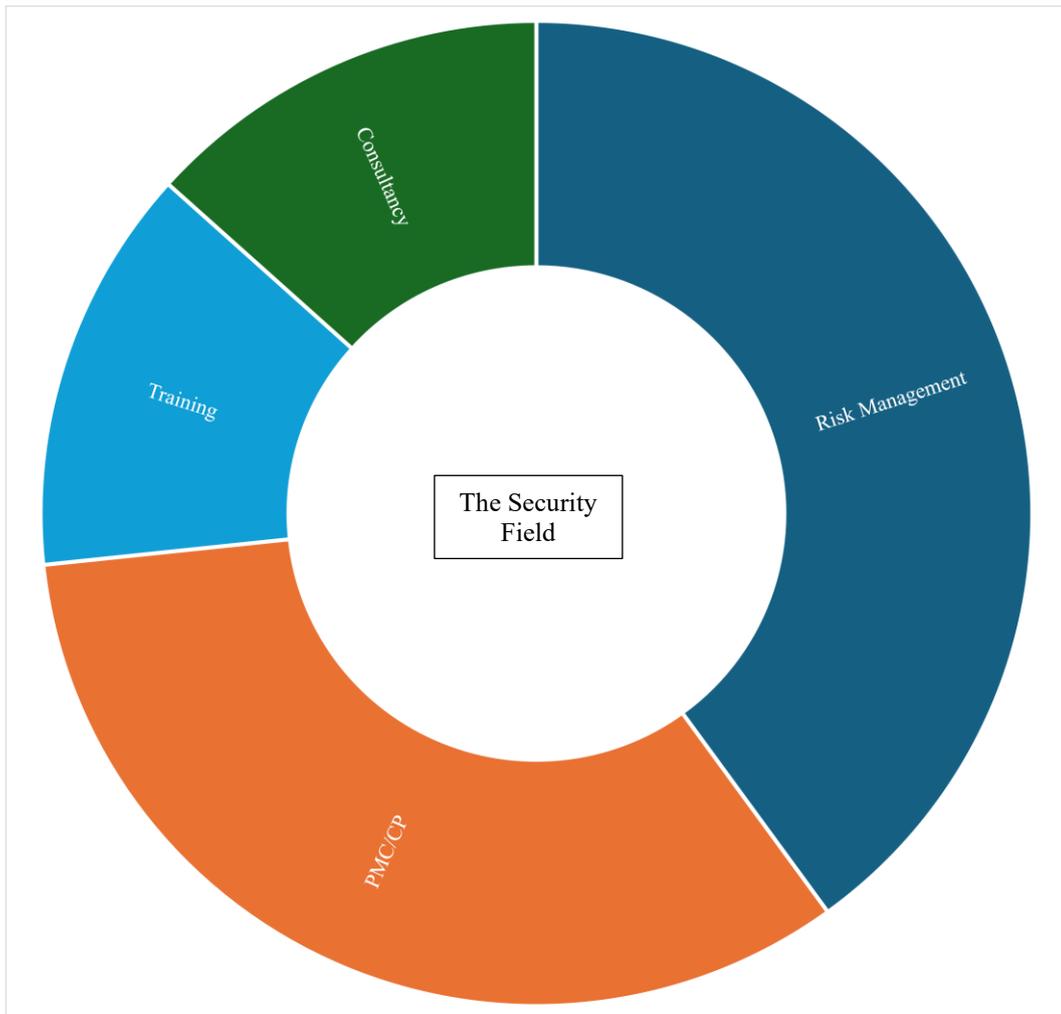
Security is an enormous sector within the global economy, no matter which way you slice the data. In a recent effort to outline the dimensions of what the term "security capitalism," Maguire and Low (2024) note that the traditional walls between national defence and internal policing have collapsed in many regions, and the growth of so-called surveillance capitalism has provided many new

markets. Added to this, the roll back of state provision of security is striking today. In short, security is a new mode of governance, a massive market, and often the sector of choice for ex-military Special Forces.

Of course, the security market has a low and recognizable entry level, the level of security "guards," CCTV operators, bodyguards, etc. Figures on this traditional security market size and growth are difficult to come by. However, reasonable estimates of the commercial security market indicate it is worth approximately $300 billion per annum. In America, around two million people work in the private security sector, meaning that private guards outnumber police by a ratio of 3:1. Similarly, and disturbingly for some commentators, the world has seen a vast increase in the use of Private Military Contractors (PMCs) in conflict zones during the past twenty-five years (see Gonzales, Gusterson and Houtman 2019). One can easily see the security field's scale, dimensions, and imbrications by considering the patterns in the network I researched. One can see the "entry-level," the adjacent fields, the specialisms, and the insularity—there is even a celebrity layer. A simplification of the pattern is shown below:

Figure 10: Roles over time

Early Role(s)	Current Role
	Risk Management [n=4]
Close Protection	Company owner [n=3]
(Bodyguard) [n=5]	United Nations Analyst
PMC [n=7]	[n=1]
Trainer [n=3]	Media personality [n=3]
	Consultant [n=3]
	PMC [n=1]

What one sees here is a few salient security sector entry points, above and more specialized than the sector's general entry level, from which ex-teams' members eventually diversify into more high-value roles. But how is this narrated, and how much of this gradual migration is down to a network". Here is a former 22 SAS operator:

Well, I think, at the end of the day, I've only been in the army. So my skill set was around security. So, it was about making that transition from what I knew into the commercial world. I mean, the job I had, the [first] was pretty basic. I mean, it was a month in [_____]. We were working with the [_____], you know, just pretty much security manager, driving around in a desert, all that sort of stuff. So, stuff that was quite easy to use your skills in, you're out of the army, and to do that sort of job. We had a mixture of

Americans and British, because it was an American company. I was a

pretty kind start. (interview 2023).

Later in the interview he returns to this topic:

At that point I had a wife and two kids, they're in school and all that sort of

stuff, so that puts a lot more pressure on you, I think. I think I made it like

that. So, I think I was sort of lucky in some ways. I got a job straight away.

So that was stellar. So, I got some experience straight away. So, it's really,

to have something on my CV, I then got doing the bodyguarding and stuff.

I picked up a job looking after some "rare cherubs" [*meaning high-net-*

worth individuals] and that was more flexible. […] It was good money.

And I was, you know, getting used to earning the money, probably three to

five times what I would have been paid in the army, even though we were

the highest paid people in the army.

The pay was different, for sure, but the work was much the same. At

the back of your mind, however, you're thinking, that its sort of like *I*

hadn't really left the army.

Another former operator, this time an ex-Ranger, gives a succinct account of the

importance of networks in this world, and thus to the whole process of transition:

You're leaving one club would you join a much bigger club, a global

Network because I do encounter them, you inevitably will if you stay in the

business, you will encounter guys from the Brits from the Americans from the French, wherever, then from talking to someone you know from the "circuit " [*industry term meaning security network*] they will become friends with you thus you develop a wider or broader network. You're constantly developing your own tight network that keeps replacing the old one, but you keep networking in the larger network which is much looser, where everybody's doing their own thing, they're all trying to survive, to run a business, they have their own things going on, but we have that mutual beneficial society. You still don't know if everyone like's you but you know that if they respect you, and you respect them then everybody's helping each other out, so it makes a difference it's a different closer club, you know the things that are expected of you within the club that's probably what keeps you focused on those traits, on the street the next couple of decades, like you know because they have an expectation of you, where I might not personally know you, but I know someone who knows you and your reputation today is all you have in the community so I expect you to honour that and your connections.

Networks

The central research question, which delves into the pivotal role of networks, is of profound importance. Drawing on the seminal work of Pierre Bourdieu (1990) on institutional culture, "habitus" and "fields", I will meticulously examine the power of networks to provide access to information, opportunity, and support. This research is not just an academic exercise, but a crucial exploration of the dynamics within the international elite Special Forces community, a small yet influential

group where operators and units from various nationalities often train and deploy with one another. This unique setting provides an ideal case study to evaluate Bigo's claims, expanding to questions of reciprocity, durability, and kinship (gendered "brotherhood") in the scholarship (e.g. Strathern 1996), and adding to the anthropological and psychological literature on military/civilian transitions and security culture more broadly (see Ben-Ari and Sørensen 2019; Low and Maguire 2019).

However, language seems to fail here. We are not discussing kinship-based networks with kinship understood classically: social recognition of biological ties as per WHR Rivers or AR Radcliffe Brown (descent rather than "biology"). And yet, "brotherhood" seems to be salient in analogical reasoning. In the context of the international elite Special Forces community, 'brotherhood' refers to the strong bonds and sense of camaraderie that develop among operators, often transcending national and cultural differences. That said, former operators have families, and know the difference between the two. Bigo's "guild" over institutionalizes the scene. Firstly, an image will help. Here are the members of the network of interviewed research participants represented as a network-diagram.

Figure 11: Research participants represented as a network diagram
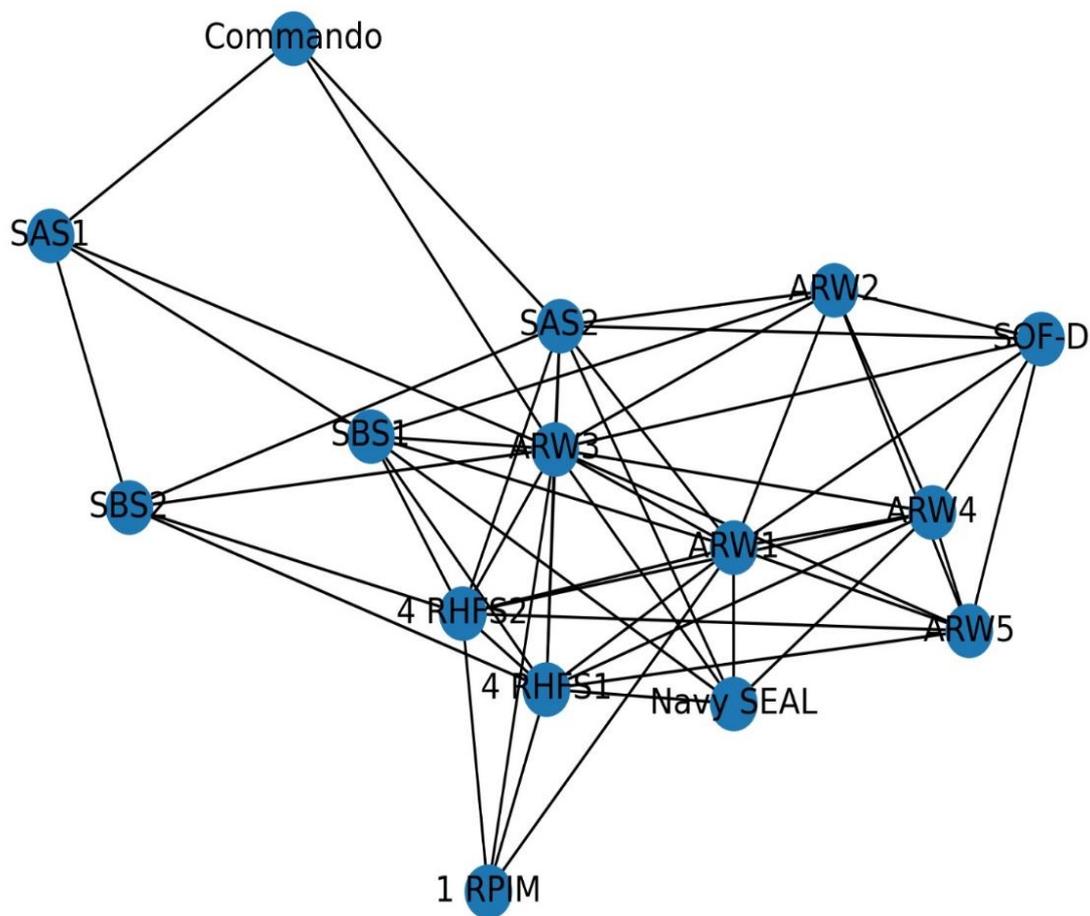
It is clear to see that there are greater numbers of connections relating to some individuals, and when referring back to roles and career positions, one finds that those individuals are more successful in the security industry (see Fig. 7). In short, some individuals are a source of contacts and contracts. Therefore, one should conclude that this is merely a diagram of economic relations. However, if this were true then it would be most logically composed of members from one or two units at most, a neater and more effective network. It isn't: it is rather a representation of an international "brotherhood" that doubles as a resource—plainly, at the outer extremes one can imagine other networks, partially overlapping, a series of systems within systems.

Another crucial aspect to consider is the nature of economic behavior within these networks. Despite the varying degrees of success and career advancement among its members, these networks persist over time, indicating that economic motives are present but do not act as an exclusion criteria. In my research, I discovered instances of positive and balanced reciprocity, as well as instances of punishment for negative reciprocity. In essence, the expectation was to assist 'brothers' and never to harm them, for instance, by placing them in unnecessarily risky situations (see next chapter).

Perhaps the most fitting analogy for these networks is, ironically, embedded in the idea of analogy itself. As Yochai Benkler (2006) explains, the 'wealth of networks' is not limited to economic capital. It is a wealth that stems from the power of analogy. For instance, kinship can be more than just a familial relationship; it can serve as a useful framework for understanding and navigating social networks, as Roy Wagner (1977) famously demonstrated in Analogical

Kinship. Therefore, these kin-like networks are not only powerful and reciprocal but also durable and motivated.

Partly, this phenomenon's 'positive' aspects may elucidate why individuals are drawn into networks that offer durability, reciprocity, and a sense of belonging. Pierre Bourdieu and a cohort of social scientists influenced by him grapple with this as the 'paradox of doxa'. Bourdieu pondered, why is the symbolic order of the world widely respected, even by those who are most disadvantaged by it? As we have hinted, for Bourdieu, doxa is the internalized, non-discursive, and practical recognition of the 'rules of the game' in social institutions, which may be founded on a misunderstanding of the actual processes shaping those institutions. Here, Bourdieu (1998) articulates this in stark terms:

> Throughout my life I have been amazed at what one might call the paradox of the *doxa*: the fact that the order of the world as we know it, with its one-way streets and its no entry signs (both literally and figuratively), its obligations and its penalties, is generally speaking respected. I find it surprising that there are not more transgressions and subversions, crimes and "madnesses" (here you need only think of the extraordinary concordance of thousands of human dispositions - or wills - involved in five minutes of car-driving around the Place de la Bastille in Paris). It is even more surprising that, leaving aside the odd historical accident, the established order, with its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, its privileges and its injustices, manages to perpetuate itself so

very easily and that it is often possible for the most intolerable conditions of existence to appear as acceptable and even natural.

Bourdieu gives us numerous empirical examples of how doxa work in education, culture, and economics, etc. The artist may recognize that sacrifice provides symbolic capital, but that capital may not arrive in time to save the starving artist (perhaps because some starving artists are actually living off inherited or benefactor wealth). More precisely, mastery of doxa may because it could be based on misrecognition, trap the subject. In this case here, the so-called paradox of doxa is when the ex-operator, cut off from the brotherhood, seeks out the brotherhood, only to be trapped by it. The social science literature on military-civil "transition" ignores this while arguing that old competencies should be converted into new ones.

Chapter 5: Cultivating Competency

During those initial years after leaving the military, I knew that my Achilles heel was my lack of formal education qualifications. I was a bit battered and bruised physically, mentally, and in spirit. The last element is hard to quantify—certainly, its confidence and self-belief, but perhaps also a sense of purpose. How do you start again by going backwards, back to school, childhood, to repair, then move forward? So, I worked as a "contractor" in the Middle East, Central and South America, because I could, and I was good at it. But I couldn't do it forever. I noticed I was taking risks, welcoming danger, and it soon was obvious that I needed to build a different life, one worth living.

I took a job with a major oil and gas company and soon oversaw their security across East Africa, but, again, I noticed that new recruits had better formal qualifications than me, and eventually I realized that I was no longer qualified for my own job. I was offered a role with the United Nations, but it was a difficult interview process, precisely because of qualifications. Sometimes, people's options are narrow, and sometimes those options have been narrowed unnecessarily, through carelessness, neglect, not understanding the risks. (Author's reflections 2024)

In April 2024, as I was finalizing my research, a disconcerting story about a 'failed' transition emerged in the national newspapers of my home country, Ireland. Journalist Naomi O'Leary uncovered how Libyan militia leader Khalifa

Haftar had engaged two former members of the elite Army Ranger Wing, in clear violation of a United Nations arms embargo, to train his forces. These two former Rangers had been operating a company, Irish Training Solutions, for several years, primarily recruiting departing and former Irish soldiers for guarding and close protection services. However, in 2023, the company took a significant multi-annual contract with Khalifa Haftar to work with the 166 Infantry Brigade, the 'Libyan National Army,' which is in conflict with the UN-recognized government in Tripoli.

The original article by O'Leary is written in the tone of a breathless scoop, but, in truth, the story landed on the journalist's desk because of infighting among current and former Irish Training Solutions employees and those who were not offered work. The contract was clearly lucrative. In 2022, the company showed negligible profit, while in the financial year 2023, its records showed it made a profit of €738,088. In short, operating a small security company in Ireland is a hard path to follow, and there are easier, if illegitimate, paths that can be taken. In the case of Irish Training Solutions, the temptation was obviously overwhelming. Former Rangers have skills that are in demand, we assume that they will not "sell" those skills based on state policy—e.g., the UN arms and training embargo—and "cultural" mores. The latter is illustrated in O'Leary's expose.

> Some photographs show men wearing the badge of Irish Training Solutions and Irish Tricolour patches, at times alongside the unit badge of the 166 Infantry Brigade of the Libyan National Army, of which Haftar is the general commander with his sons in powerful roles. Cluskey [*one of the ex-*

Rangers] was photographed signing papers at a desk in an office with the flag of Haftar's Libyan faction hanging behind him. A nameplate on the desk reads "Brigadier Saddam Khalifa Haftar" in Arabic, the name of Haftar's son and presumptive heir, considered to be a rising power in east Libya (O'Leary 2024: 3).

There is of course plenty to criticise about the behaviour of Irish Training Solutions staff, from the effect of their work on the faltering Libyan peace process, to the danger of unrestrained and geopolitically destabilizing competition with Russia's Wagner mercenaries. That said, much of the reporting re-inscribed the symbolic problem of transition. Here we have a liberal democracy, Ireland, that trains a Special Forces unit, then throws them out onto the roads of the world, and expects them to successfully transition—laying down their skills and colours—with little or no assistance. Historically in the Irish civil service, this was known colloquially as a "sink or swim policy." In short, then, we must reconsider the social-scientific literature on transition, and "competences," and connect this with critical analysis of the actual policies that encourage successful transition.

The problem of competences revisited

As noted earlier, the most significant recent work on military-civilian transition focuses on competency. According to Cooper et al (2016: 158-9),

The particular relevance of habitus, capital, and field to an understanding of military-civilian transition can be articulated through the concept of

cultural competence. Cultural competence is an understanding of what is appropriate or unacceptable within a particular social and cultural context (i.e., in a particular field). Cultural competence is akin to acquiring a ''feel-for-the-game'' in Bourdieu's terms. Having a feel-for-the-game means that one's habitus is attuned and adjusted to the demands of a particular field; one knows what is expected and possesses an intuitive understanding of the preverbal, taken-for-granted organization, and conditions of the field. Bourdieu referred to such intuitive understandings as the *doxa*, the term for the unquestioned shared beliefs that are both specific to, and constitutive of, a particular field. Cultural competence thereby explains how individuals become proficient within a culture and how they learn to ''play the game'' and acquire a pre-reflexive and instinctive grasp of the *doxic* rules that constitute the field. Such competence enables individuals to develop social resources that help them to accumulate status, power, and wealth. We argue that military and civilian fields require different sets of cultural competences and are structured by particular values and are characterized by different ways of communicating and relating to others; different living arrangements; different criteria for ''success''; and different standards of behaviour, dress, and bodily comportment. The *doxic* position is different in each field, and therefore the veteran in transition must acquire a new competence in the rules of civilian life if he or she is to enjoy a ''successful'' transition.

All of this raises the question: is "transition" just a matter of acculturation into a new field with different capital, habitus, and thus competencies, a cultural problem?

Before continuing with this line of argument, it is important to restate that for many academics, especially those who self-identify as "critical military studies" researchers, transition implies a pseudo divide between "military life" and the civilian realm, a distinction they are keen to deconstruct. This position is outlines succinctly by feminist researchers Bulmer and Eichler (2017: 166):

> Transition discourses rely upon the idea of distinct realms, just as the tenets of civil–military relations in liberal democracies also depend on such distinctions. Militaries have often invoked their special status and their right to be 'different' from civilian society to justify the exclusion of certain people from militaries, or to explain military behaviours. This suggests that the demarcation between these spheres is integral to the production of military force and that feminists should be very cautious about re-invoking it in their analyses of military power.

However, Bulmer and Eichler admit their project is essentially political: challenging "militarized masculinity" and thus transforming society. The data complicates this project. Transition is a fact in veterans' experience, it occurs earlier in the military career than in other professions, and it carries more risks. Moreover, it is not linear, rather it is suggestive of "co-extensive, ever-shifting, and unstable assemblages of military and civilian life that are lived across a

lifetime" (2017: 178). This recognition of the social 'fact' of transition is a significant step in the right direction, as it has been overlooked in critical military studies that have "privileged" identity in studies that should have attended to the unfolding of a complex process. In their work, we see this important recognition, and the sub-state policy and unfinished temporality of the process, but the process itself is not studied. On the contrary, Bulmer and Eichler (2017: 165) pull in the opposite direction by overstating the role of the state and state-civil society policy. For example, they state:

> In countries such as the US, Canada, or the UK, the transition from military to civilian life has been recognized as a key concern. Western countries are increasingly trying to support military-to-civilian transition through a suite of services and benefits delivered by military, state, third-sector, and private providers. For example, … in the UK, the Veterans Agency is part of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and its remit is to help 'ex-service personnel get appropriate support from government, local authorities, independent bodies and the charity sector.' […]
>
> Alongside mitigating the effects of war and military service and the associated costs, it is important to recognize that some state elites now view 'successful' transition as a core component of military recruitment and retention. … A veteran, by definition, is neither civilian nor military. […]
>
> In summary, it is clear that the transition from military to civilian life has become a core project of Western governments in the early twenty-

first century. Governments recognize this project as important not only to mitigate the effects of war and military service, but to ensure the broader legitimacy of the armed forces and thus continued recruitment and retention. This suggests that the transition to civilian life is integral to the production of military force. The discourse of transition relies upon and reproduces clear distinctions between military and civilian spheres, and between military and civilian identities. Military and civilian spheres have different values and norms, and it is being suggested that veterans must actively 'become' functioning civilians. That is, it assumes that soldiers can and must be turned back into civilians. In reality, the transition from military to civilian life shows tensions, and a blurring of lines, between military and civilian spheres and identities.

Therefore, before thinking about how to cultivate "successful" post-transition competences, we must consider what policies exist, and their efficacy, and ask questions about what we have learned about competences (including in this thesis).

In the previous chapter, I showed that my research participants were members of a loose network, many of whom worked as private military contractors or in close protection. However, several eventually migrated toward more "regular" careers. I showed that former Special Forces were becoming canalized during transition: lacking the qualifications and doxa to enter mainstream societal roles immediately and having skills in great demand in the private security sector, they were pushed out of the mainstream and sucked into

the relatively familiar world of private security. The paradox here is that my network of research participants, as a network, is enabling a "successful" transition to roles such as risk management, NGO training, and consultancy, together with the darker side of private military work. However, knowing what fate would have befallen the ex-Forces members had such support not existed at all is difficult. There is no state policy here unless one takes abandonment as a policy. In this light, do we understand cases such as that of Irish Training Solutions in Libya as a "failure" of transition or as an inevitability?

Stories matter

Competences, life, transition, and adaptability to a new environment. How does this actually play out? I compressed several interviews into one composite story and narrate it here—to give a full sense of the typical journey, but also to mask details that would not be permitted in the public realm. To create this compressed story, I sorted interviews into bullet points, arranged them sequentially, and generated a single "interview" transcript as below.

> *Life as an "consultant" is not as far removed from the military world from where I came, and not as far removed as many transitioning soldiers first think. To begin with, and in many respects the civilian world or corporate environment is pretty well structured and organised when compared to the military world. There is a very well laid out chain of command and corporate structure, the C Suite at the top followed by the varying layers of management broken up and split across the different departments and*

business segments, and just like the military there happens to be plenty of people occupying functions that maybe shouldn't be in those positions.

In the corporate world, they use words that I was not familiar with, but it didn't take me long to realise and understand exactly.

I would have to become very adept at interacting, understanding and winning their trust if I was to survive. In the military, your stakeholders are mission focused, basically because the military is there to represent the national identity, and that the fact that on every mission or task, lives and multimillion dollar assets are constantly at stake. The military is working with a common focus and purpose under the government's directive and on behalf of the nation and its people, corporations on the other hand of course are working on behalf of their shareholders and the bottom line.

In the military, we always look at the worst-case scenario when undertaking the planning phase for anything that we do, be that an exercise, an operation or just a block of training. This is quite a departure from the realities found in the corporate world. "It's like comparing apples and oranges, the only thing they have in common is that they're round!"

In the corporate world, there's a lot of "backstabbing," cliques and selfishness from either a personal or departmental level. It's a minefield. More dangerous for your career than a real one.

There are areas that seem identical, like risk assessment. You produce a risk matrix explaining that will explain the risk likelihood, its impact on assets, life, and productivity. Thereafter, we can plan our

mitigation measures and draft a plan. However, in the corporate world

there is a culture of taking chances and paying lip service to risk. Nobody

likes the "Merchant of Doom" dropping in and spreading their magical

security processes fairy dust around, about and on top of their departments

and lives. It takes time to understand the politics within each department

and who's affiliations lie where within the organisation. Unfortunately, it

also normally takes a major security incident, a "I told you so" situation

before the stakeholders really sit up and take notice.

You have to be good at your job, i.e. have real marketable skills, but

you also have to sell your job to the company hiring you, and to insider

stakeholders, then you have to protect you job, by watching the politics but

not getting too close to it to be burned. Over time, you find yourself sitting

in an office, just doing your job, bored.

This compressed, composite interview shows that transition is possible, but it takes

opportunity, support, a safety net, and a desire to succeed. It also requires the

cultivation of new practices, something else we may learn about from Bourdieu.

Hence the importance of the brotherhood-network. Very little of this is seen, not to

mind supported officially. Indeed, special forces transition seems untouched by

transition policy.

Policy matters

Bulmer and Eichler (2017: 165) assert that "the transition from military to civilian

life has become a core project of Western governments" as a means to "ensure the

broader legitimacy of the armed forces and thus continued recruitment and retention." While initial observations of the relevant policy documents may suggest commendable governmental commitment, a more thorough examination uncovers fundamental gaps in thinking, provision, measurement, outcomes, and reflection. In this analysis, I delve into the transition support systems in the UK, France, and Ireland, shedding light on their respective strengths and weaknesses.

The UK armed forces established a tiered approach for service leavers. Soldiers, sailors, or airmen who have served six or more years are entitled to a resettlement program where access to Standard learning credits (SLC) and the Enhanced Learning Credits (ELC) become available. Additionally, service leavers who are ELC registered and have completed the appropriate qualifying years of service have the opportunity to access a first full Level 3 qualification (equivalent to two GCE A levels or vocational equivalent), or a first higher education qualification (a foundation degree or first undergraduate degree or national equivalent) free from tuition fees under the Publicly Funded Further Education and Higher Education (PF FEHE) scheme.

The UK scheme for assistance is calculated on "Reckonable Service". Reckonable Service refers to the period of military service that is officially recognized and counted towards various benefits, entitlements, and pension calculations within the British Army. It is a term commonly used in the context of determining a soldier's total length of service for retirement or other administrative purposes.

In the British Army, reckonable service encompasses the time during which an individual actively serves in the military. This includes both regular

service (full-time, career military service) and certain types of reserve service. The reckonable service is often a crucial factor in calculating a soldier's pension and other benefits, as it directly influences the final entitlements a service member receives upon retirement or discharge.

Various types of military service may contribute to reckonable service, including time spent on operational deployments, training, and certain periods of reserve or auxiliary service. It's essential for service members to keep accurate records of their service, as this information is used to determine their eligibility and entitlements after leaving the military. The specifics of reckonable service may vary based on the regulations and policies in place at any given time, so individuals should refer to the official military guidelines and documentation for the most accurate and up-to-date information regarding reckonable service within the British Army.

In the British Army, service within specific fields like within the Special Forces, with units such as the SAS (Special Air Service), SBS (Special Boat Service) or the SRR (Special Reconnaissance Regiment), typically counts as reckonable service. Reckonable service encompasses all periods of service that contribute to various benefits, entitlements, and pension calculations. This includes not only regular service but also certain types of reserve and specialized service.

The French military have a similar policy in place namely the Defence Mobility Program, uniquely this program is also open to spouses of service leavers. They also have gateways for physically and psychologically injured ex-service members. A prevalent service-related medical issue that is well

documented in all militaries around the world is that of hearing loss due to the issue of poor hearing safety equipment (which great strides have been made in improvements). This type of injury is, of course, compounded and much more prevalent during active deployment and combat, where deployed troops may not have time to prepare themselves accordingly before engaging or being engaged by enemy forces.

The French Defence Mobility program stands out for its inclusivity, catering to all groups from enlisted to commissioned ranks, civilian employees, injured service leavers, and even spouses. The training opportunities offered are diverse, ranging from Vocational training certification to professional career guidance and access to a network of prospective trades, employers, and other government agencies or civil service. This comprehensive approach to transition support is a testament to the French military's commitment to its service leavers. Uniquely, the French military also has the Foreign Legion which was created in 1831 and formed an integral part of the Land Army; the latest figures have the Legion comprising of nearly 9,500 troops with over 150 nationalities making up 12% of the French Land operations force, which exceeds the entire Irish Defence Forces combined of the Army, Navy, and Air Corps. Legionnaires sign up for a minimum contract of five years after the five-year contract is over, he is entitled to get a French work permit. Also, a Legionnaire may request French nationality once he or she has passed three years of service. (He or she obtains it automatically if seriously injured during an action.) After 17.5 years of service, he or she is eligible for a retirement pension. The Foreign Legion also have several retirement homes for former Legionnaires, one is located in Puyloubier at the

Institution of the Invalides de la Légion Etangère where they make their own brand of wine and ceramics which are sold to raise funds to support its occupants.

The Irish Defence Forces, unfortunately, have a reputation for being one of the most challenging militaries in Europe when it comes to terms and conditions of service and transition support. The persistent neglect of the armed forces by successive governments has led to significant retention and morale issues across all branches. This is further exacerbated by the lack of transition skills training and support, whether through vocational or third-level opportunities. The situation is particularly dire for service leavers who potentially joined in their late teens and have now completed the required 20+ years of service for their pension. Recent changes mean that post-1995 service leavers must wait until their 60s to access their pension. Service leavers in their 40s are now faced with a dilemma, as starting a second public service career is of little use to them, effectively penalizing them for transitioning into another branch of the public service. From a training and resettlement perspective, there is currently no comprehensive training and transitioning package available to service leavers outside of basic computer literacy courses and upskilling on existing trades or expertise that have some relevance to the outside world.

It falls squarely on the soldier or the service member to plan and plot out a route for resettlement usually by using existing contacts and networks. The majority of service members recruited in recent years within the Irish Defence Forces do not see themselves undertaking a career to retirement age within the armed forces of Ireland, which is a damming testament to the mismanagement of the organization. Upon retirement from the Defence Forces, welfare of ex-soldiers

(service members) is undertaken by charity organisations such as ONE (Organisation of National Ex-Service Men) and Irish UN Vets.

From Stories to Practices, and (better) Policies

For soldiers, their military role and identity are deeply intertwined, making the transition to civilian life a challenging process. In many cases, this shift leads to a loss of established identity and purpose, leaving transitioning soldiers grappling to find a new sense of direction, at least in the short-term. The lack of structure and focus that the military once provided can exacerbate this struggle. All of this is multiplied for the ex-Special Forces operator, who has less time to devote to an even more dramatic transition.

Scholars working within critical military studies now admit that their hostility to "transition" research was not a principled one but rather an ideological effort to deconstruct the "special status" of military masculinity by diminishing the challenges faced by former soldiers (see Bulmer and Eichler 2017: 166). Having now admitted that soldiers do face earlier and more pronounced transitions than former, say, doctors, journalists, or teachers, scholars working within critical military studies now inflate the role of the state in managing transition, which has become a "co-extensive, ever-shifting, and unstable assemblages of military and civilian life that are lived across a lifetime" (2017: 178). However, as I have already shown, state policy is weak in this area, and the Special Forces operator is clearly not in a loose but constant assemblage with civilian life. Indeed several reasonable statements might be useful at this point.

Many ex-Special Forces do have successful transitions. Policy is overly broad in this area, and yet is narrow when considering the kinds of pathways

available. That said, ex-Teams do possess valuable skills, such as leadership, teamwork, and discipline. They may find it challenging to translate these skills into civilian terms that potential employers understand. Management and leadership within the military are distinct from those in the civilian world. Although ideally suited, it does take time for the individual to properly grasp and understand how to transfer those leadership and management skills.

Finding suitable employment can often be difficult, which leads to canalization into specific areas/sectors. Civilian job markets may not recognize or value military experience, indeed in some cases service within the armed forces can work against the candidate, other factors can also compound the transitioning service member as in many cases soldiers may lack the specific qualifications or certifications required for certain types of civilian roles and jobs.

An unfortunate side effect of service with the military is the likelihood of soldiers being faced with and experiencing extreme situations not normally experienced by their civilian counterparts, this in turn can then manifest itself into physical, phycological and mental health challenges, such as physical injury, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. *The stress associated with transitioning to civilian life can exacerbate mental health issues*, especially if they do not receive adequate support. Moreover, this can push former teams members to the company of comrades, and towards specific fields—though it must be said that this was not a significant issue among my research participants.

Soldiers fight for their values—they do not have jobs in the traditional sense—and their career choices post-transition are also layered with their values, or just closeness with their community, their brotherhood. Soldiers often have a

strong support network within the military community. Friendships and bonds that are developed during service are generally far stronger when compared to the civilian world, these bonds and friendships are developed and forged throughout times of shared successes and hardships, pride and achievement, combined with suffering and loss. Transitioning to civilian life may mean leaving behind this support network, often leaving means severing ties with close military friends due to moving away from the unit or base or if the service members former unit deploys overseas leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Soldiers may also face financial challenges during the transition period, especially if they do not have savings or if they experience delays in receiving benefits such as pensions or disability compensation. In many cases service members are not prepared financially or have existing loans and financial liabilities that were accrued during their time in service. The loss of a steady paycheck combined with the immediate requirement to now accommodate and administrate themselves such as personal responsibilities in regard to individual tax, medical and dental responsibilities add to the burden and in numerous cases combined with some of the other problems encountered as previously listed can lead to homelessness, dependency on drugs, alcohol and eventually prison. A study conducted by the UK Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Defence in 2010 found that veterans represented around 3.5% of the male prison population in England and Wales (DASA 2010).

All of the above statements lead us to a core question: is it bad that many ex-Special Forces gravitate to the security industry? Martin Van Creveld's *The Future of War*– regarded as a prophetic masterpiece by military types—argues that

the military-civilian world has always existed less like a "co-extensive, ever-shifting, and unstable assemblages as an assemblage" and more like a predictable set of fields with definable boundaries. Between the military and the civilian world we find the multi-billion dollar/euro security industry, which is more of a threat to civilian life than an ex-soldier with PTSD. "Indeed," he famously argued, the time may come when the organisations that comprise [the security business] will, like the *condottieri* of old, take over the state" (1991: 207). Although there is no particular threat to the state in the case of Irish Training Solutions, for example, there a risk that normal foreign relations will be damaged, in the form of, according to the *Irish Times,* "potential reputational risks" (2024). The proper word for this according to Maguire and Westbrook (2020) is lèse-majesté, meaning an insult to sovereign power. Perhaps it should not be surprising that self-protection is the military-institutional response to a high-profile transition failure. However, a better response is possible, one that takes seriously the dangers of and draws of the security industry, one that is cognizant of the power of practice.

Competence as practice

In the work of Cooper et al (2018), the key to addressing the challenge of transition is 'competences,' a concept that has become a cultural cornerstone in veteran and military studies. By following a similar path as these authors, drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital, I have underscored the importance of networks in this context. To tackle the evident issue in policy, as mentioned earlier, we could return to Bourdieu, or more precisely, continue his line of thought, which revolves around 'competencies.' This approach could lead

us to the crucial realization that tailored support is essential in transition policy, a finding that could significantly impact the lives of military personnel.

Bourdieu's theory of practice (1990) is typically taken as a way to connect structure and agency, showing how often hidden processes come to play a role in people's individual lives. In schools, for example, Bourdieu-inspired research shows how the education machinery reproduces class by coopting the values and attitudes of students. Thus, students from disadvantaged backgrounds may resist school life, and so perpetuate disadvantage by opposing middle-class membership in the shape of school authority, for instance. To respond to this, scholars have insisted that we must respect the culture of schools, reach students where they are, and propose pedagogical techniques that respect their values while not diminishing their educational opportunities. Seen in this light, we have the suggestion that a focus on practice, the ground on which social formation takes shape, may be able to reorient a topic like transition to useful policy outcomes.

This PhD is an ethnographic study not a policy one, however some tentative recommendations do arise based on its theoretical and empirical findings. The field of the military and special forces in particular is not well-disposed to deal with a problem like transition, and with costs being high and potentially "perpetual", governments try to offer broad and shallow supports rather than bespoke supports. In a sense, and contrary to recent scholarship (see Bulmer and Eichler 2017), governments seem more willing to absorb reputational damage than to achieve individual successes in transition policy. Like tax avoidance, which is not illegal, here we have responsibility avoidance, which may be immoral but is legally acceptable. Bourdieu's theory also called attention to habitus, so I have

painted a picture in this thesis of closely bonded, high-tempo operators who are masters of a craft that they pride themselves in, more akin to a team of professional athletes than bureaucratic servants. How, then, might we develop a transition policy that chimes with these operators, that does not disrupt their high-tempo work, and adds subsequent value?

Finally, a broad picture is developed in this thesis of transition, but one that ends up not in a delta but in a river or even a canal: in the security sector. This reality must be accepted, and education programmes should be developed to permit varied transition yet be attuned to the reality on the ground: most ex-operators spend at least some time in the security sector. This is a commercial sector, so commercially-relevant support is needed, perhaps without even being bespoke to the military-civil world.

Therefore we are left with a picture of ordinary level and higher level skills that can be cultivated—rooted in the "practice" of being an operator, and attuned to the reality of post-transition life, as below:

Figure 12: Transition Supports for Operators

Ordinary Level	While Operator	Post-Transition Civilian application	Outcome
	Sub-aqua training	Recognition for Divemaster qualification	Immediate employment
	Boat skills	Boat master qualification	Immediate employment
	Parachutist	Skydiving instructor	Immediate employment
Higher Level	Leadership	Online training while serving or credits for university course (RPL)	Medium to long term
	Management	Online training while serving or credits for university course (RPL)	Medium to long term

	Security planning	Online training while serving or credits for university course (RPL)	Medium to long term
	Close protection	Online training while serving or credits for university course (RPL)	Medium to long term
	Risk analysis	Online training while serving or credits for university course (RPL)	Medium to long term
Generic Supports	Business startup; SME loans		Long term

Plainly this is illustrative, and there is much that does not transfer easily, but it is a reorientation from the abruptness of the total institution to civilian world, an effort to reduce the shock of the new. Below I make further comment in the conclusions.

Conclusions

We are the pilgrims, master; we shall go always a little further: it may be beyond the last blue mountain barred with snow, across that angry or that glimmering sea.

– Poem inscribed on the SAS parade ground memorial (The Clock Tower), Credenhill, Herefordshire

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the paradox presented by transition for Special Forces operators. For men—and they are mainly men—who join elite forces, life involves selection, separation from others, individual acts of Olympian physical prowess, but also deep and sincere team bonding. These men become members of a brotherhood—to borrow from one interviewee, a team of "Avengers." Thus, a transition is a new, sudden, and perilous journey, but they cannot complete it by relying on innate or previously acquired skills. In a way that resonates with the trials of heroes in Greek mythology, during a transition, the extraordinary powers possessed by the operator are gone, so they must rediscover and rebuild themselves. (Little wonder that military sociologists, once dismissive of the concept of "transition," have now, based on actual research, come to recognize just how challenging the move to civilian life can be). In this thesis, I have, following Pierre Bourdieu, explored the field, habitus, and forms of capital of Special Forces operators. Thus, unsurprisingly, I have concluded that the transition is a zone of interest where we see agency and structure shaping decisions.

Decisions for soldiers, like so much in life and in common with everyone else in society, are shaped by and generally come about due to the situation in which people find themselves. Sometimes, these situations are produced, and on other occasions, they result from our environment. Many of the ex-Special Forces I interviewed for this thesis followed their star in life. They are undoubtedly unique individuals, but that does not mean that their behavior does not form a pattern, perhaps even one that is obscure to them. This is the value of an anthropological project on this topic: it is a study of the cultural context in which specific people make their decisions and the pattern that arises, which we call culture.

As I have shown, to take that first step towards a life in the Special Forces is just that, a first step. There is no pat on the back or external motivation other than that of your current situation and the environment you find yourself in at any given point. Candidates for selection often withdraw due to injury, but motivation, or lack thereof, is the most significant cause of withdrawal. In the moment when you have to make a decision, character, shaped by cultural background, is decisive. The hardy, resilient, resourceful individual required by the Special Forces is partly born and partly made but revealed in selection. Different interviewees whose words I recorded during this thesis put it differently, but a pattern is still evident. The ability to block out the world, life outside of your immediate space in time, other people, the environment, the pain, cold darkness, exhaustion, and your niggling doubts that is what matters at the moment; that is what get's you through, that is your one-foot world, your world where you and only exist in that exact moment.

My discussion of habitus in this thesis has shown that questions about innate attributes and socialization are somewhat beside the point. Selection assumes a population with innate physical abilities and psychological attributes, but the entire system—described memorably by one operator as a "socialization machine"—is about connecting the body, and agency to structure. At the end of the day, you must embrace your training, to use it and develop it as a tool and a technique, and do so shoulder to shoulder with others. Not everyone who serves in an elite unit will go on to attempt or indeed attend selection for a Special Forces unit. The fact that candidates come from across all military branches is a testament to this. Attendance on selection can be brought about from exposure, where prospective candidates have had the opportunity to work alongside or closely with Special Forces units.

Regardless of the path taken to the unit, whether from a different branch or background, once you become a badged, card-carrying member, your past is soon forgotten, and you become an operator. True validation comes only when the honor of being selected to serve within its hallowed ranks has been bestowed upon you by your unit. Being selected for service means counting yourself as a member of a chosen few and having the honor to serve within the ranks of the global special operations community. This is a journey that takes place away from the fanfare and celebration normally associated with milestone achievements outside of a very small circle. But when the time comes, when your skills are needed, the honor and privilege of your service shine through.

The formative years of service within the various units now all cobble together in whatever form works for the individual, which lends itself to how they

navigate the path that is not yet determined or illuminated. This is where the difficulty lies, in the darkest of nights when cold and wet, with aching back and limbs, with that niggling doubt that sits on your shoulder and whispers into your ear, now manifesting itself as a shadow that hangs over the next challenge. This time however, probably the biggest challenge of all, the transition away from the military, from your Special Forces family to civilian life, not just another transition, this transition is a whole other unknown quantity, but it has to be treated just as all those challenges that came before, like a team of operators formed up preparing to step over the threshold of a door into another room containing who knows what—It's a journey that is too-often underestimated, but one that every team member must face.

Now, however, this new threshold must be crossed alone, without the comfort and support of their team mates to rely on, to quell the doubt and fear that is ever present in the back of their minds. They now rely on a new team of operators, a team composed of individuals who have successfully managed their own doubts and demons, who have successfully taken their own step over that threshold into the next stage or chapter of their yet unwritten story. This is where our networks and connections truly come into play. They are our lifelines, our safety nets, and our guides in this uncharted territory of civilian life. They are the ones who understand our struggles and can offer the support and guidance we need to navigate this new world.

While writing this thesis, I have had the opportunity to discuss and better understand the challenges and hurdles others in my community face when transitioning. I was struck early on in my research that the guys who faced this

next daunting phase of their story now carry a virtual backpack filled with the weight of doubt, loneliness, financial burden, family responsibilities, and self-belief. It is those who placed one foot in front of the other with their head into the wind no matter how far the next checkpoint or how high that next peak seemed to be, those who trusted in their ability, listened to the whispers of advice and followed the path of those that had gone before them early on would become successful and adaptable in transition and after that in their lives.

I did not focus on PTSD and other forms of trauma in great detail here, yet it is worth acknowledging it again at this point. PTSD is a common experience for ex-service persons, often an effect of service, but I also suspect that transition away from team life may accelerate the onset of symptoms. Again, I did not focus on this. However, there is anthropological literature that dovetails with my sense that transition can provoke a crisis where the effects are mental health symptoms (see Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Indeed, a project must be completed on the ever-widening cracks and crevices that expose the former operators who once carried themselves upright with pride and confidence deep into a seemingly unsurmountable pit of despair. We have seen where transition, separation, and loneliness can extenuate deeply buried and suppressed emotions that will have been gathered over years of service in hostile and dangerous environments. Indeed, in some cases, some of these anxieties may have followed the ex-operator from their early years, from their upbringing, environment, or social standing in society to where the operator finds himself when he undertakes that transition to a different social context.

Transition requires the ex-operator to learn habitus, the set of deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their socialization and that shape their behaviors and perceptions. This habitus is of a new environment outside of the very specialized one in which they have existed up to that point. One may recall here that Pierre Bourdieu likened habitus to a game with rules one must learn and accustom one's body to, such that the game seems natural and instinctive. Learning a new game can seem daunting, different, and alien to the individual compared to explaining life within the Special Forces to a non-Special Forces person.

However, the often-underestimated transferable skills gained throughout service are a perfect fit for high-performance organizations, institutions, and leadership positions. These skills, honed in managing complex environments, large teams, and high-stakes negotiations, are highly relevant in the civilian world. Yet, it's of utmost importance for all stakeholders to actively engage in understanding these transferable skills and their interoperability with current daily practices in military life, underlining the urgency of this matter.

In fact, the lack of understanding, awareness, and openness displayed by numerous intuitions and organizations in the private sector, combined with the lack of preparedness by the transitioning soldier, either on a personal level or indeed offered by their unit or government, generally compounds and hinders the ability of service members to transition to the private sector successfully. Who is to blame for all this? Of course, the transitioning service member must take responsibility and ownership concerning their planning and preparation prior to the transition; however, not unlike the knights of old, every service member in

their first few days of military service swears allegiance to their head of state, constitution, and country. This is an often underestimated and misunderstood act that only a few people outside the security services will ever comprehend. As a newly enlisted member of the armed forces of whatever age they happen to be, swearing this oath of allegiance is binding oneself in mind, body, and spirit 100% to the service of your country.

Consider the immense personal sacrifices made by Special Forces operators, who operate at the highest levels of tempo and through thresholds most will never experience. This level of commitment, carried in terms of physical and mental capital, surely warrants a modicum of respect and support when that period of service, of all-consuming commitment, is eventually fulfilled.
Should it fall back to the arms of the "Old Boy Network," should the transitioning operator be treated as a husk of their former selves once the decision to leave their unit is made? Unfortunately, we have seen this to be precisely the situation in most cases of transitioning service members, not only former Special Forces operators. They were cast aside by their country with only the most basic effort to re-socialize and re-introduce themselves, despite the public investment in them and the sacrifice they made in return.

The transfer of capital from one way of life to another is the challenge that the operator finds him or herself faced with during transition; how does the former warfighter achieve recognition and value on the outside if not supported and assisted by their own institution and country?

The loss of institutional knowledge is a significant consequence of inadequate transition support. This knowledge, hard-earned over years of

commitment and investment, is a valuable capital that should be retained within the military.

The socialization machinery of the military and Special Forces and the demand to excel where others struggle to take these lessons hard learned and to use them as a foundation to manufacture a baseline to strike out on a new path in an unfamiliar world. As Loic Wacquant noted, boxing gyms produce "entrepreneurs in bodily capital." However, no matter how well the boxer does as a pugilist, she runs into other forms of capital that oppress or discriminate. As in a boxing gym, in the military, we see "class capital," officer versus soldier, and social class reflected in resettlement and efforts put into the continuous personal development of soldiers prior to leaving and undertaking their transition. Special Forces allow soldiers to excel and achieve status, merit, and recognition that would otherwise not have been attainable within the rigid and structured ranks and classed society that makes up the military institution. Special Forces have a higher turnover of soldiers when compared to standard units when comparing percentages versus size. Why is this? As previously explained, it's primarily due to the operational tempo and the very nature of the psyche of the operator where they are always chasing the next challenge; additionally, cultural and attitude changes within the greater military complex or unit that they are part of. A soldier in their late 30s or early 40s can have completed an entire military career, meaning that the twenty-one-year contract is completed relatively early in life compared to their peers in the civilian world. Twenty-one years of continued service in any field is a milestone in any career. However, a successful transition still leaves the option for that second life or second career to develop at a relatively young age.

Successful cultural adaption and re-socialization to civilian life by the former operator cannot be left to sit squarely onto the shoulders of the said operator; they will experience separation all over again now without the support structure and certainty of rank and function they have become so accustomed. The availability of time to serving soldiers to upskill and qualify for a different field while still in service is limited or not available to the majority as a commitment to the unit and military is seen as paramount and taking precedence above all other desires.

So, what is the solution? Or is there a raft of solutions? Of course, there is no one-stop shop; some will undoubtedly fall through the cracks. However, we can do better, governments can do better, and military organizations can do better. Take away the class structure and look at what we are talking about here: soldiers, sailors, and airmen who went on to achieve the gold standard within the global military complex, the best of the best, the ones who put everything above and in front of their own desires and wishes first. As a society, we owe it to these people to put a better policy in place, to not just cast them aside when they feel that their time has come to transition; we own at least the same commitment to these former or soon-to-be former operators that they showed their countries throughout their careers.

Retention is now also constantly discussed by government and military senior management. Would the private sector only allow its best to walk out the door without at least discussing retention or consulting opportunities? Not in my experience, that is for sure, so why is the military content to beat the drum of retention without trying to retain its valued expertise? Why should the carrot only

be guilt and service? Why not look at linking service to higher education? Not just some close protection or other course that limits growth!

If we take, for example, the drive and ambition held by Special Forces operators throughout service, why not link a level 7 ordinary degree in Leadership, Management and Business to career progression, starting at the junior Non-Commissioned Officer place marker of Corporal, such a degree will put the Corporal on a path comparable to that of a junior officer. Indeed, such a qualification could be used for promotion through the ranks from NCO to officer, opening a whole other world of opportunity within service for the NCO within the military and increasing retention.

In addition to this qualification, you now arm the transitioning soldier with something of value in the private sector. Such a degree (earned and paid for through continuous service) is now a valuable tool and asset to prospective employers in the private sector. It becomes a validation of management ability, personal growth, and self-determination.

In addition, if such a program was instituted (not only for Special Forces but military-wide), then as part of the final assessment, the student would be asked to develop a business plan. This business plan would have a multifold benefit. In the first instance, it would allow the soldier to explore the practicality of their concept, secondly, the financial viability, and thirdly, additional requirements or qualifications required to achieve the end goal.

The military is also missing another opportunity here by way of retention. As anyone who has started a business or indeed has a family or friend who has started a business knows there are major financial considerations to take into

account, not to mention removing the security blanket of current employment, the difference with transitioning soldiers in this instance here is that once the decision to leave has been taken the option to change one's mind and come back into the military fold is normally not available in the short term.

Most militaries have their own financial institutions, such as Credit Unions; why not link the business plan of the transitioning soldier to the opportunity of financial support broken over time? Let us say, for example, over a four-year period during which loan repayment is linked to a solid business plan, ongoing mentorship, and paid reserve service with a defined commitment requirement per year. To ensure repayment of the loan, the reserve commitment payment and duration would match 50% of the duration required to serve, so in theory, each day served, the now reserve soldier would receive 50% of the standard rate of pay with the remaining 50% going towards the loan repayment.

In this manner, the military retains expertise and plugs the gap in the skills loss and brain drain that happens when soldiers transition. This goes some way to improving retention figures, allows a safety net of sorts for the transitioning soldier, lessens the opportunity for negative physiological impact, and provides continued access to military support and medical services, thereby reducing the financial burden of business startup and ongoing cost of living costs.

Right now, Special Forces operators are not "walking away" from their former team members, out through the barracks gates and into a new life. Instead, governments are walking away from ex-Special Forces, so, lost, they turn back to their comrades, to the bonds of friendship, and "choose" careers in the security sector, where their competencies are in demand but where they will remain

canalized, and with other possibilities for human flourishing potentially choked off.

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