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Review of International Studies / *FirstView* Article / February 2015, pp 1 - 23

DOI: 10.1017/S0260210514000424, Published online: 04 February 2015

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0260210514000424

How to cite this article:

Katharine M. Millar Death does not become her: An examination of the public construction of female American soldiers as liminal figures. *Review of International Studies*, Available on CJO 2015 doi:10.1017/S0260210514000424

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Death does not become her: An examination of the public construction of female American soldiers as liminal figures

KATHARINE M. MILLAR*

Abstract. Since the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, over 150 female American military personnel have been killed, over 70 following hostile fire. Given Western society's long-standing practice of reserving the conduct of collective violence to men, these very public deaths are difficult to encompass within the normative and ideological structures of the contemporary American political system. This study examines the ways in which the public duty to commemorate the heroism of soldiers – and the private desire to accurately remember daughters and wives – poses a significant challenge to coherent discursive representation. In doing so, the study employs hermeneutical interpretation to analyse public representations of female soldiers and their relation to death in US popular culture. These representations are examined via Judith Butler's concept of *grievability* – the possibility of receiving recognition as a worthy life within the existing social imaginary. It is argued that female soldiers are grievable as both 'good soldiers' and 'good women', but not as 'good female soldiers'. The unified subject position of 'good female soldier' is liminal, and thus rendered socially and politically unintelligible. The article concludes with an analysis of the implications of this liminality for collective mourning and the possibility of closure after trauma.

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Introduction

Since the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by the United States and its allies, over 150 American female military personnel have been killed as a result of their duties,¹

* Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Critical Voices in Swiss International Relations Conference (Geneva, 2012) and the Canadian Political Science Association Annual Conference (Edmonton, 2012). I would like to thank the conference discussants, Krystal Carrier-Sabourin, Xavier Guillaume, and Marysia Zalewski, as well as the excellent anonymous *RIS* reviewers for their very discerning comments. Thanks are also due to Elizabeth Frazer, Elisabeth Prügl, Julia Costa-Lopez, and Aiko Holvikivi for their insightful engagement with various drafts of this article.

¹ 'Iraqi coalition casualties: Military fatalities', *iCasualties.org*, available at: {<http://icasualties.org/Iraq/Fatalities.aspx>} accessed 17 October 2013; 'Operation enduring freedom casualties: Military fatalities', *iCasualties.org*, available at: {<http://icasualties.org/OEF/Fatalities.aspx>} accessed 17 October 2013; Hannah Fischer, 'A guide to U.S. military casualty statistics: Operation New Dawn, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom', *Congressional Research Service* (19 February 2014), available at: {<http://fas.org/spp/crs/natsec/RS22452.pdf>} accessed 14 October 2014; 'Faces of the Fallen', *Washington Post*, available at: {<http://apps.washingtonpost.com/national/fallen/>} accessed 25 May 2014.

more than 75 as a result of hostile fire.² Women have accounted for approximately 10 per cent of US military personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq, and fewer than 3 per cent of fatalities.³ Though quantitatively fewer in number and proportion of fatalities than their male counterparts, this figure represents the highest total of American female military fatalities since the Second World War.⁴ An additional 800 American women have been wounded.⁵ This unprecedented female casualty rate has resulted in the creation of a public discourse grappling with issues of remembrance, patriotism, violence, and gender. Together, these complex factors have served to reignite the ‘women in war’ debate – focusing on the issue of women in combat – in an attempt to resolve the tension inherent to representing female military personnel as ‘good soldiers’ while simultaneously maintaining their construction as *women*.

This tension has been further complicated by the continuously evolving and persistently inconsistent policy context in which the participation, and deaths, of American female soldiers in combat have been situated. Broadly, the roles of women in the US military have, as observed more generally by Cynthia Enloe, reflected a creeping re-evaluation of what women ‘can’ do. Though war was once generally considered too dangerous for women, they have taken on more and more ‘militaristic’ roles, while, until extremely recently, reserving the actual conduct of (and corresponding exposure to) violence to men.⁶ Despite the gradual incorporation of women into other branches of the US military,⁷ and the casualty statistics to the contrary, for the entirety of the war in Iraq and the vast majority of the conflict in Afghanistan, women in the US Army and Marine Corps were prohibited from direct participation in violence, and officially barred from combat units.⁸ Following a brief 18-month interim period, wherein the Pentagon opened approximately 14,000 positions involving proximity to combat (though not its direct conduct) to women,⁹ Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced in January 2013 that the combat ban for women was to be completely lifted.¹⁰ Crucially, however, as the lifting of the ban, in practice, will proceed in phases, it will not be completed until 2016 at the earliest – well after the proposed 2014 withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Within this context, the aim of this article is to identify and untangle the power relations and normative structures involved in, and political implications of, the competing and contradictory constructions of female American soldiers and, crucially,

² As classifications of ‘hostile’/‘nonhostile’ deaths are often matters of interpretation, and various countries and branches of the armed forces have different reporting practices, such figures are a ‘best estimate’ at time of writing only.

³ Monica Davey, ‘For 1,000 troops, there is no going home’, *New York Times* (9 September 2004); Mark Thompson, ‘Women not-quite-in combat’, *TIME*, available at: {<http://nation.time.com/2012/02/10/women-not-quite-in-combat/>} accessed 16 October 2012.

⁴ Thompson, ‘Combat’.

⁵ David F. Burelli, ‘Women in Combat: Issues for Congress’, Congressional Research Service Report R42075 (9 May 2013), available at: {<http://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42075.pdf>} accessed 14 October 2014.

⁶ Cynthia Enloe, *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), p. 82.

⁷ In 1993, restrictions prohibiting women from serving as combat pilots, or serving on combat ships were lifted. In 2011, women became eligible for deployment on US submarines, ending the last gender segregation in the US Navy. See Sara L. Zeigler and Gregory G. Gunderson, *Moving Beyond G.I. Jane: Women and the US Military* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005), p. 43; Phil Stewart, ‘Women to start serving on US Navy submarines’, *Reuters* (29 April 2010).

⁸ ‘Army Policy’, *Washington Post* (1 May 2008).

⁹ Craig Whitlock, ‘Pentagon to ease restrictions on women in some combat roles’, *Washington Post* (9 February 2012).

¹⁰ Elisabeth Bulmiller and Thom Shanker, ‘Pentagon is set to lift combat ban on women’, *New York Times* (23 January 2013).

their deaths. The choice to examine soldiers' deaths was not made lightly, or with morbid intent, but rather derives from its singularity as a political phenomenon. In its finality, death creates a strong discursive pressure for closure, giving the statements and images that are employed in remembrance a particular political salience. In the face of contested or ambiguous identities, such as those of female soldiers, the political and emotional stakes of this impetus for 'closure' only increase. After all, what is said (or unsaid) about a person following death reflects society's understanding of her identity. Correspondingly, the ambiguities and tensions that characterise virtually all attempts to represent women in the military are heightened, and thus more readily visible, in the instances of their deaths.¹¹ Such representations do not occur in a vacuum, of course, but both reflect and inform the discourses and representations of women in war generally.

This article thus analyses public representations of the deaths of female soldiers as a means of comprehending the complex negotiations between state power and individual experience in producing the figure of the female soldier. More specifically, it examines the political nature of commemoration and grief utilising a combination of two complementary concepts – Judith Butler's notion of 'grievability' and the anthropological understanding of liminality. As noted by Butler, few people 'ever receive the equivalent to the paragraph-long obituaries in *The New York Times* that seek to humanize ... often through nationalist and familial framing devices', the deaths, or, more importantly, the *lives*, of those who die violently.¹² The remarkable presence, in many ways, and unaccountable absence, in others, of American 'servicewomen', their participation in combat, and ultimately, their deaths in the mainstream media is indicative of a particular, yet contested, understanding of the contemporary soldier, and the contemporary woman. In short, informed by Butler, this article asks: '*What makes for a grievable life?*'¹³ On what *grounds* are female soldiers grieved? How are they (or are they?) made socially intelligible?

To engage with this question, this article analyses visual and textual public representations (and the lack thereof) of female soldiers in relation to combat in US popular culture. This includes public war memorials, acts of Congress, 'death rolls' in the popular media, op-eds, letters to the editor, and even obituaries. While not all materials – particularly those relating to expressly public memorials, of which there is a severely limited universe – were systematically sourced, the printed material was derived from two separate searches of the Factiva news database. The first search gathered all materials relating to female soldiers – later culled to encompass only those articles relating to either female casualties or women-as-potential-casualties – while the second searched the names of each of the American military women who have been killed thus far in Iraq and Afghanistan. Similarly, while this article is primarily interested in female soldiers in their own right, the construction of male soldiers is also briefly considered, in order to elucidate (dis)continuities of representation with respect to soldiering and gender. The sourcing procedures for these materials was conducted in the same manner as described above, with the key exception being that the obituaries were selected with the aid of a random number generator as the greater number of male deceased makes consideration of the universe impractical. This data is thus intended to illustrate, rather than exhaustively encompass, the discourses and practices inherent to the mourning and commemoration of female soldiers. As such, the material was then interpreted in order

¹¹ Thanks to the anonymous *RIS* reviewer who provided this insight.

¹² Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 12.

¹³ Butler, 'Precarious', p. 20.

to map the (dis)continuities and competing constructions of 'female' 'soldier' in the contemporary United States.

The article proceeds with an explication of the key theoretical concepts informing the interpretation of the data. The subsequent empirical section discusses state practices of commemoration, and the ways in which this 'normal', politically-obligated mode has been 'troubled' by the proximity of women to combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is followed by an examination of the ways in which expectations of commemoration pose challenges for the representation of women in official national monuments. The ensuing empirical section examines 'private' representations of women in combat and their proximity to death, namely the expressions of personal bereavement of deceased female soldiers' loved ones, primarily in the form of obituaries. Overall, the article finds 'female soldier' to be an ambiguous subject position, placed simultaneously between and *outside* the conflicting normative/ideological imperatives of patriotism and hetero-normative femininity. This liminality, it is argued, precludes the achievement of closure sought by social mourning practices, instead constituting a continued form and experience of trauma impelled by the seeming impossibility of representing the position of 'female soldier' in its entirety and its complexity.

Grievability, liminality, and political community

Death may be a counterintuitive point from which to begin an analysis of the ideological/normative stability of a political system. Yet, as observed by Jef Huysmans, as human existence in modern Western societies is typified by a double fear of death – a fear of death at the hands of others and, more seriously, a fear of the uncertainty of death¹⁴ – death has an incredible political salience. This fear creates a space of power for any figure or institution – in the past, God, today, the state – which can successfully mediate death by not only providing physical security, but also by concretising the unknown in the spectre of external threats.¹⁵ In this way, the desire to prevent/understand death becomes a precondition for political community, as 'people group together because of a fear of the power of other people to kill and because of the uncertainty about life'.¹⁶

The crucial ideational structure supporting the state's ability to ontologically secure the polity, particularly in times of heightened threat, is nationalism – a discursive formation and ideological structure crucial to understanding public acquiescence to the fine line walked by the state as the guarantor of security. As 'political identity relies on the threatening force of the other [and] security policy aims ideally at eliminating this threat',¹⁷ the state is placed in the tense position of risking (even sacrificing) some lives to secure the preservation of the polity. The state is thus

¹⁴ The 'Western-ness' of this relationship between death and political community bears repeating, as does Butler's own qualification of her original conceptualisation and analysis of grievability as a 'first world critique'. While grievability and ontological security offer an exceptionally useful lens for considering contemporary American discourses relating to 'women in combat', they ought not, at least in this specific formulation, be generalised across place and time. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 93. For more on this point, please refer to Maja Zehfuss, 'Hierarchies of grief and the possibility of war: Remembering UK fatalities in Iraq', *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 38:2 (2009), p. 423.

¹⁵ Jef Huysmans, 'Security! What do you mean? From concept to thick signifier', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:2 (1998), pp. 235, 238.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

constructed and maintained through the very practice, and concomitant eventuality, that it is intended to quell. In other words, 'to be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state'.¹⁸ The spectre of death is thus crucial to the (re)production of the state/society, and public/private, distinction that underscores the modern polity and informs its politics. When the state is successful in obscuring its own dependence upon the threat of violence, it is vested with legitimacy, meaning that, 'if, for instance, someone kills or is killed in war, and the war is state-sponsored' (and thus implicitly required to preserve the community) 'then we consider the death lamentable, sad, and unfortunate, but not radically unjust'.¹⁹ Nationalism, then, produces a particular form of (vulnerable) subjectivity – a communal being that is to be protected, yet required to risk his life to protect the community.

The above use of the masculine pronoun is significant, as the universalised subject produced by nationalism does not describe *any* given member of the polity. According to Joshua Goldstein, in order to overcome psychological resistance to the perpetration of violence – either in the form of moral objection or simple fear – 'cultures develop gender roles that equate "manhood" with toughness under fire',²⁰ resulting in a gendered division of labour wherein men are understood as 'protectors' and women as 'weak innocents'.²¹ Over the course of modernity, this gendered division of labour was solidified as a social institution by the development of the mass army, which conscripted all able-bodied men, ensuring that the majority of the male population was engaged in the state-sanctioned practice of violence.²² The ability and willingness to perpetrate violence thus became a requirement of masculine citizenship, fusing masculinity and militarism/nationalism. In contradistinction to this masculine role, women have come to be assigned 'support' roles,²³ such as caretaking, reproduction of 'the nation', symbolic potential victimhood, etc., all of which serve to constitute a feminine 'other' to militarised masculinity. These stereotypical cultural identities are perhaps best encapsulated in Jean Elshtain's 'perennial images of the "Just Warrior", the male protector of home and hearth, and the "Beautiful Soul", the female innocent whose purity is to be defended'.²⁴

In the gendered system of warfare, the subject in need of protection is feminine, while the subject obliged to protect is masculine. The spectre of death, then, reinforces a patriarchal division of societal tasks. Cultural anthropologists argue that this urge to 'classify', or to 'categorise' the fundamental aspects of human social life reflects the 'hope of successful management of a situation, as if the inability to classify would signify an open recognition of humans' fundamental helplessness in the face of the world'.²⁵ This corresponds with Huysmans' assertion that 'ontological security' against

¹⁸ Butler, 'Frames', p. 26.

¹⁹ Talal Asad, cited in Butler, 'Frames', p. 41. For the original, please refer to Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

²⁰ Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice-Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 10.

²¹ Charli R. Carpenter, *Innocent Women and Children: Gender, Norms and the Protection of Civilians* (Chippenham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2006), pp. 50–2.

²² Carpenter, 'Children', pp. 48–9.

²³ Goldstein, 'Gender', p. 9.

²⁴ Cited in Helen A. Kinsella, 'Securing the civilian: Sex and gender in the laws of war', in Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (eds), *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 253–4. For the original, please refer to Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women in War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

²⁵ Maria Mälksoo, 'The challenge of liminality for International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 38:2 (April 2002), p. 485.

the uncertainty of death is maintained ‘by fixing social relations into a symbolic and institutional order’,²⁶ which, it is argued here, is always-already gendered. In doing so, the state identifies the legitimate agents and casualties of violence as male, and passive, illegitimate victims as female, making gender a key factor in assessing whether a subject’s exposure to violence (or combat) is normatively acceptable, and, correspondingly, whether a death is an unfortunate inevitability or an atrocity. In this way, death, and the potential for death, as observed by Butler, becomes an inimically political occurrence, as ‘one way of posing the question of who “we” are ... is by asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable’.²⁷ More succinctly, those who are mourned, and those whose potential mourning may be contemplated – and *on what grounds* – are reflective of the normative boundaries and ideological convictions of society.²⁸ The related question of grievability, of whose life is recognisable as socially intelligible, in this context may thus alternately be understood as the question of whose life the state is allowed to risk, and who is allowed to risk their life for the collective. Representations of female soldiers as potential combatants and as deceased, therefore, are examined because they provide insight into the (in)stability of the ideological constructions underscoring the relationship between state and (liberal) society.

It is precisely because of their relationship to ideological constructions of normative nationhood that the public monuments and death notices of female soldiers are of great political significance, as the combination of grief and outrage with which their exposure to violence and deaths are greeted may be involuntary, but not spontaneous, as they are ‘highly regulated by regimes of power and sometimes subject to explicit censorship’.²⁹ In this way, the vulnerability of female soldiers to violent death constitutes both a challenge to the normative assumptions of the polity *and* an opportunity for the state to solidify its power through the myth-making function of public commemoration and mourning.

The political obligation of mourning

As described above, due to the centrality of death to the construction and maintenance of political community, public mourning has become a politico-normative requirement for all, but especially those in power. Some of the most obvious examples of public mourning are the concurrent resolutions of the Vermont Congress passed ‘in memory of the American military personnel who have died in the service of their nation’ each year since 2002.³⁰ These resolutions list the name, rank, and branch of service of each person killed in Iraq or Afghanistan during the previous year following the official declaration

²⁶ Huysmans, ‘Security’, p. 242.

²⁷ Butler, ‘Frames’, p. 38.

²⁸ It should be acknowledged, of course, that there are several theoretical difficulties inherent to combining the insights of cultural anthropologists and poststructural theorists, the most significant being the ontological status of ‘structure’. While acknowledging that cultural anthropologists tend to be interested in structure as universally ordering, whereas poststructuralists are more concerned with processes of contingent marginalisation, this article attempts to combine the insights of the two by bringing the anthropological concept of ‘liminality’ to bear on the ‘manifest’ structures investigated by post-structuralists (Iver B. Neumann, ‘Introduction to the Forum on liminality’, *Review of International Studies*, 38:2 (April 2002), p. 474).

²⁹ Butler, ‘Frames’, p. 39.

³⁰ Vermont State Legislature, ‘House Concurrent Resolution in Memory of the American Military Personnel Who Have Died in the Service of Their Nation in Iraq from December 20, 2005 to December 29, 2006’, HCR 17, 2006–7 Session.

‘whereas it is fitting to honor the memory of the brave Americans who have perished’.³¹ Similarly, major American newspapers provide a regular accounting of recently deceased American soldiers, listing their name, age, and place of birth. *The New York Times*, for instance, publishes a ‘Roster of the Dead’ each January, which is supplemented by a ‘List of Americans Killed’ or recounting of the ‘Names of the Dead’ at various intervals throughout the year. The popular, near-tabloid magazine *People* routinely publishes a photo spread of military personnel killed overseas under the headline ‘Honoring the Fallen’.³²

This listing of the dead may be read as an act of recognition, as the dead are accepted as socially intelligible subjects within the prevailing normative order. ‘American soldier’ is an identity that makes sense in this context – the soldier is lauded as an excellent citizen for joining the military and is expected to fight. It is accepted that the soldier might die, making recognition of that death a politically obligated, but not normatively troubling, performance. The process of listing without personal detail is crucial, as the deceased are recognised by state and societal authorities as a *group*, thus solidifying the social order by reiterating the identity/role/function of ‘soldier’. The liberal individuality of the soldier is thus purportedly acknowledged, but in a way which actually works to elide any difference between them.³³ The recognition of the deaths within the context of war thus gives them meaning within the nationalist myth without constituting them as overly tragic or threatening. Such practices have come to constitute the political norm of nationalism-imbued mourning.

Public mourning in this form is presented as a normative duty to the fallen and a public service to the community. Such practices may thus be understood to constitute liminal rituals in the conventional anthropological sense, a process of transition involving separation from conventional society, the temporary suspension of social convention, engagement in atypical or abnormal practices, and, finally, reintegration into the community.³⁴ The liminal phase, involving the suspension of social convention (such as the requirement to go to work) and engagement in abnormal behaviour (such as displaying extreme emotion in public) is intended to allow both collectivities (in this case, likely society) and their constituent individuals to cope with transition and trauma in a manner which simultaneously ‘manages’ the fear associated with uncertainty and reinforces the social ties of the group. As such, the mourning practices discussed above function as inherently political acts, either in demonstrating the membership of the liberal press in the polity, or indicating support for the state’s institutional goals. In other words, in the contemporary United States, failing to ‘support the troops’ is political suicide. As observed by Major Beck of the Marine Corps, who is tasked with notifying loved ones of soldiers’ deaths, ‘If you don’t feel this loss in some way, I’m not sure you’re American.’³⁵

Mourning, then, represents an attempt to regain control over the unknown in a manner that reaffirms the social order of the polity – and the legitimacy of the state – ensuring the ontological security of the whole. This is why, in times of war, state

³¹ Vermont State Legislature, ‘House Concurrent Resolution in Memory of the American Military and Central Intelligence Agency Personnel Who Have Died in the Service of Their Nation in Iraq or Afghanistan from January 21, 2009 to December 31, 2009’, HCR 219, 2009–10 Session.

³² Joanne Fowler et al., ‘Honoring the fallen’, *People Magazine* (28 December 2009).

³³ For more on this point, please refer to Jenny Edkins, ‘The rush to memory and the rhetoric of war’, *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, 31:2 (Winter 2003), pp. 238–45.

³⁴ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick: AldineTransaction, 2009) pp. 94–5.

³⁵ Quoted in Janet Maslin, ‘Bearing witness to the fallen and the grieving’, *New York Times* (5 June 2008).

officials often present the public with ‘triumphalist images that give us the idea of the human with whom we are to identify’, such as ‘the patriotic hero who expands our own ego boundary ecstatically into that of the nation’,³⁶ reconstituting a proper death as a purposeful act that is to be admired, even envied. When the potential of death, under particular, state-sanctioned circumstances, and in relation to the appropriate male subject, is internalised as a normal aspect of social life, it may function to reinforce, rather than threaten, the social order. This elevation of the hero, intended to persuade citizens of the duty and glory inherent to self-sacrifice for the nation, underscores what Butler refers to as the ‘differential distribution’ of mourning,³⁷ as it constructs some deaths, and, retroactively, some lives, as *better* than others. As such, there is an implicit ‘norm governing who will be a grievable human’, which is ‘circumscribed and produced in these acts of permissible and celebrated public grieving of others’ lives’.³⁸ Men, then, who risk their lives and die in order to protect the collective are thus constituted as having lived the best of lives. Soldiers are eminently grievable – in certain sanitised and ritualistic practices.

Tension between US military policy and practice

The requirement of mourning, however, constitutes a problem for the state/military establishment. As observed by Jenny Edkins, while rituals of public mourning are generally understood to be led by government, reinforcing myths of nationalism and the authority of the state, the actual practice is a more complex negotiation between the ‘public’ and the state. Drawing on the work of David Cannadine, Edkins notes that state-led mourning is often tempered by ‘demands from the public for a particular form of remembrance’.³⁹ In this case, as the figure of ‘American soldier’ which informs any given death is embedded in the gendered system of war, and, as such exists in tension with the notion of women as actors in war, the state is caught between competing structural normative imperatives of patriotism and, in a sense, patriarchy. When one thinks of the abstract ‘American soldier’, the image that comes to the mind of most is that found in *People’s* tribute to the fallen – a square-jawed, serious young man (often white) in military dress uniform photographed in front of an American flag. The affect produced by the structuring of the image is one of pride, perhaps tinged with regret, but not an ecstatic outpouring of grief. Imagining a young black woman in fatigues in the same list does not tend to produce the same accustomed response. If the ‘unmarked’, or natural, universalised, American is white, and the unmarked ‘soldier’ is male, the disruption of this unified, familiar subject position by the intersection of gender (and, of course, race, class, queer/trans gender identities, sexual orientation and other, important, marked, apparently particularistic facets of identity that are bracketed, to an extent, in this study) works to produce an experience of breach.⁴⁰

The reality, of course, is that one does not need to imagine women on the rolls of the dead. Over one hundred women have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, many

³⁶ Butler, ‘Precarious’, p. 145.

³⁷ Butler, ‘Frames’, p. 38.

³⁸ Butler, ‘Precarious’, p. 37.

³⁹ Edkins, ‘Memory’, p. 233. For the original, please refer to David Cannadine, ‘War and death, grief and mourning in modern Britain’, in Whaley and Joachim (ed.), *Mirror of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death* (London: Europa, 1981).

⁴⁰ For more on the relationship between universalised unmarked and inherently particularistic marked social categories, please refer to Linda A. Waugh, ‘Marked and unmarked: A choice between unequals in semiotic structure’, *Semiotica*, 38:3–4 (1982), pp. 299–318, esp. pp. 309–10.

of whom, if not actively engaged in combat, were present in combat situations.⁴¹ The official army policy set in 1994, which governed the conduct of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq until February 2011, however, only allowed women:

To serve in any officer or enlisted specialty or position *except* in those specialties, positions, or units (battalion size or smaller) which are assigned a routine mission to engage in direct combat, or which collocate routinely with units assigned a direct combat mission.⁴²

Under this policy, women were to be protected from harm and restricted to roles reasonably commensurate with conventional femininity, such as nursing and other support roles. In practice, however, throughout the ‘global war on terror’, women have been not only present in combat situations, but actively participating. Over the course of the war, due to the need for qualified personnel, the Army adopted an *ad hoc* practice of skirting these restrictions by having women ‘attached in direct support of’ combat units rather than ‘assigned’ to them.⁴³ The normative demands of patriarchy, in other words, were relaxed in the field to meet the material needs of the military.⁴⁴ Correspondingly, women were in the position of taking on pseudo-combat roles and ‘dying in a role quietly redefined’,⁴⁵ and, until very recently, officially unrecognised.

In this context, the January 2013 announcement ‘opening’ combat roles to women was less a revolutionary measure of increasing inclusion but a reluctant, and long-delayed acknowledgment of established practice on the ground. Similarly, it seems hardly coincidental that such a policy change, delayed for approximately two years following the release of the initial recommendation by the Military Leadership Diversity Committee, comes after the cessation of hostilities in both Iraq, and, in all likelihood, Afghanistan. The wording of the Department of Defense press release, moreover, leaves the door open for particular services, or military occupations, to make a case to the Secretary’s office for an exception to the new policy.⁴⁶ The US Marine Corps’ announcement of its intention to begin accepting female volunteers⁴⁷ for infantry training seems to follow this trend,⁴⁸ as it in fact is uncertain as to whether positions in the Special Forces and commando units will be open to women.⁴⁹ Overall, in a manner reminiscent of the aftermath of Vietnam,⁵⁰ significant policy

⁴¹ Davey, ‘Troops’.

⁴² Post, ‘Army’.

⁴³ Ann Scott Tyson, ‘For female GIs, combat is a fact; many duties in Iraq put women at risk despite restrictive policy’, *Washington Post* (13 May 2005).

⁴⁴ Such practices are compounded, of course, by the changing nature of combat itself, wherein the diffuse deployment of troops across a large area in an attempt to both pacify a guerilla opponent and win civilian ‘hearts and minds’ renders the traditional notion of a fixed frontline increasingly meaningless.

⁴⁵ Davey, ‘Troops’.

⁴⁶ United States Department of Defense, ‘Defense Department Expands Women’s Combat Role’, available at: {<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=119098>} accessed 21 October 2013.

⁴⁷ Joan Soley, ‘Marines to train women for combat’, *BBC News*, available at: {<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-17762042>} accessed 21 April 2012.

⁴⁸ As the Marine Corps administration has gone to great lengths to assert that female Marines will only be qualified in infantry training if they can meet the rigorous physical and mental standards required of ‘all Marines’, it remains to be seen whether this policy change will actually result in the greater inclusion of women in direct combat in practice. James Sanborn, ‘USMC 4-Star – women to attend infantry school’, *Military Times* (18 April 2012).

⁴⁹ Bulmiller and Shanker, ‘Pentagon’.

⁵⁰ For more on the end of the Vietnam War, the state of the American military establishment, and the increasing inclusion of women in the US military throughout the 1970s, please refer to Enloe, ‘Link’; Judith Hicks Stiehm, ‘Women, women, everywhere’, in Derek A. Reveron and Judith Hicks Stiehm (eds), *Inside Defence: Understanding the US Military in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); Jand Matthew J. Morgan, *The American Military After 9/11: Society, State and Empire* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

changes relating to women in the armed forces are scheduled to be implemented after the conclusion of a major conflict, allowing society time to become accustomed to the change in principle, in the absence of immediate threat.

For the duration of the conflicts in Iraq and likely Afghanistan, as well as the foreseeable future, however, this tension between the normative expectations of the polity, official military policy, and actual combat practice has often led the state into symbolically awkward situations in its attempts to note the contribution of female soldiers without recognising their participation in (and potential vulnerability to) the traditionally male practice of violence. In May 2008, for instance, the government awarded the Silver Star to Pfc. Monica Brown for her bravery under fire, but days later removed her from her unit, as she was not supposed to be serving in a combat zone.⁵¹ Her proximity to violence revealed her, in practice, to be not a support soldier but a combatant, and thus, as are all lives risked by the state, a potential death. It also highlights the strange position occupied by living female military personnel, as (ostensibly) soldier-subjects who are yet, somehow, not legitimate objects of violence. In the case of Pfc Brown, it was this very *potentiality* of death, however, as opposed to its actualisation that, while difficult to discursively accommodate, enabled the situation to be passed off as an unforeseen circumstance that incidentally resulted in breaking regulations. The obligation to engage in public mourning of deceased female soldiers, in contrast, though deriving from the same discursive formation and constrained by the same normative structures, presents the state with a much more difficult conundrum. Due to the finality of death, there is no chance to ‘undo’ the mistake through reassignment, yet the nationalistic pressure for acknowledgement is intensified. The negotiation of an ideologically ‘safe’ mode of commemoration brings the material needs of the military and nationalist discourse of the state into conflict with the essentialised gender identities structuring the war system.

Practices of partial commemoration: Acknowledgement without recognition

It would be facile, of course, to claim that such a situation is unique to the most recent conflict. The complex dynamics surrounding the commission and completion of the primary American war memorials – the Vietnam Women’s Memorial and the Women in Military Service for America Memorial – highlight the contingency of interactions between nationalism and patriarchy and strongly inform current popular representations/understandings of women in combat. It must be noted, however, that neither of these memorials are dedicated solely to *dead* female soldiers – to the best of the author’s knowledge, such a memorial, tellingly, does not exist (and certainly not at the national level).⁵² For the purposes of this article, then, these memorials are interesting in their illustration of which aspects of the experience of ‘female soldier’ (or perhaps the more-conventional ‘servicewoman’) it is possible to publicly represent, and how, and those aspects which defy representation.

⁵¹ Ann Scott Tyson, ‘Woman gains Silver Star – and removal from combat; case shows contradictions of Army rules’, *Washington Post* (1 May 2008).

⁵² The only potential exception to this statement is the memorial for 1st Lt Sharon Ann Lane, a nurse and the only American woman killed by enemy action in Vietnam, raised by the Aultman Hospital in Canton, Ohio. The memorial consists of a statue of 1st Lt Lane and lists the 110 local men who also died in the Vietnam War. Doroty Spelts, ‘Nurses who served: and did not return’, *The American Journal of Nursing*, 86:9 (1986), p. 1038; and Robert F. Dorr, ‘Nurse Sharon Lane paid the highest price in Vietnam’, *Defense Media Network*, available at: {<http://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/nurse-sharon-lane-paid-the-highest-price-in-vietnam/>} accessed 20 June 2014.

Vietnam Women's Memorial

At first glance, the Vietnam Women's Memorial would appear to provide a 'safe' form of commemoration, as it contains the figures of women performing stereotypically feminine tasks, exhibiting feminine behaviour. The statue consists of four figures – a nurse holding a supine soldier, a nurse looking for help in the distance, and a third, wounded nurse, staring into her helmet, seemingly overcome by the experience of war.⁵³ This apparent ease of representation – women in Vietnam did not serve in combat – however, belies the difficulty of the process of commemoration. As only eight American servicewomen, all nurses, died in Vietnam, and only one as a result of direct enemy action (their names are listed along with their male counterparts on the Wall of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial),⁵⁴ the struggle for representation was less directly about women in combat than their actual presence in the field of war. A full seven years after the war, women were not fully recognised as veterans, and the Department of Defense was unable to even estimate how many women had actually served in Vietnam.⁵⁵ Women in the armed forces also 'bore the sexual stigma' – primarily deviant constructions of 'prostitutes, lesbians, or desperate spinsters' – that came from participating in what, despite their stereotypically feminine tasks, was primarily considered a male organisation/occupation.⁵⁶

Following the unveiling of the Vietnam Memorial, both the Wall and, particularly, the Three Soldiers statue depicting male American combatants, a small group of nursing veterans founded a grassroots movement with the aim of installing a memorial to the women who served in Vietnam in the Mall. This movement resulted in a political firestorm, with virulent diatribe in the national press, as the Fine Arts Commission rejected the initial proposal, on the grounds that if they were to allow women to be specifically commemorated at the Memorial, all 'special interest' groups, up to and including 'Scout Dogs' would expect similar treatment.⁵⁷ The demand for women to be visually and concretely represented alongside men was a declaration of presence and participation that was difficult to acknowledge or contain. Eventually, following a public shaming of the Fine Arts Commission and other reluctant state authorities by a wide range of male veterans' groups, the memorial that now stands was commissioned.⁵⁸ It is significant, however, that the call for specific representation was heeded only after their experience was 'witnessed' by the legitimate agents of violence – male veterans. Correspondingly, the motherly, *Pietà*-like relation of the female nurse to the wounded soldier in the final piece – a visual representation of the way in which women's experience of war is mediated through and by men – seems hardly incidental.

⁵³ For photographs of the Vietnam Women's Memorial, please refer to Appendix A.

⁵⁴ The abstract listing of names on the Wall, itself a response to the difficulty of concretely representing a controversial and traumatic war, thus alleviated the difficulty of accurately commemorating dead female soldiers by failing, initially and unusually, to provide embodied representation of deceased male soldiers. The male and female casualties of Vietnam could thus coexist in abstract equality – at least, until the commissioning of the three-figure statue of male combatants that now also comprises part of the overall Memorial. For the names of the deceased female soldiers, please refer to The Wall-USA, 'American military women who died in the Vietnam War', *The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial*, available at: {<http://thewall-usa.com/women.asp>} accessed 20 June 2014.

⁵⁵ Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall, 'The sexual politics of memory: the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project and "The Wall"', *Prospects*, 14 (1989), p. 348.

⁵⁶ Marling and Wetenhall, 'Politics', p. 345.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 358–9.

⁵⁸ Dianne Carlson Evans, 'The fight for the Vietnam Women's Memorial', *On Patrol: The Magazine of the USO*, available at: {<http://usoonpatrol.org/archives/2012/04/02/the-fight-for-the-vietnam-wome>} accessed 25 April 2012.

Though the memorial quite obviously depicts death (or, perhaps, its potential), it attaches to the figure of the injured male soldier, in opposition to the idealised saving graces of the female nurses. Despite presenting an embodied representation of female servicewomen, the Vietnam Women's Memorial yet manages to construct femininity in war as antithetical to death.

Women in military service for America Memorial

In contrast to the Vietnam Women's Memorial, the Women in Military Service for America Memorial,⁵⁹ a project actually begun prior to the movement for the Vietnam Women's Memorial, garnered popular political support and generated far less controversy. The relative ease of commemorating all women who have ever served in the US armed forces, juxtaposed with the extreme difficulty of acknowledging the specific efforts of a few, seems somewhat counterintuitive, until the aim and aesthetic of the former is considered. The Memorial consists of a large marble structure, which contains an exhibition gallery, an Education Center, a Hall of Honor, and, most importantly, the Register, an interactive computer database in which every American military woman, serving from the War of Independence up to the present is entitled to be recorded.⁶⁰ Despite its respectful intent, the Memorial demonstrates two characteristics that belie its political embeddedness within the ideological imperatives of nationalism and gender and thus constrain its ability to fully represent the reality of contemporary women in combat.

The first is the mandate of the Memorial itself, to 'honor the some 2.5 million women who have served or are serving in or with the US Armed Forces starting with the American Revolution'.⁶¹ As observed by Barbara Biesecker, the interior of the Memorial is actually museum-like in its presentation, with displays dedicated to the various 'eras' of women's military service.⁶² Significantly, the creeping movement towards the inclusion of women in combat is collapsed into a single timeframe – '1946 to the present' – radically downplaying the sociopolitical and intra-institutional upheaval that such changes wrought.⁶³ As this monument is currently the only one intended to incorporate *all* female military personnel, a direct continuity is drawn between today's female soldiers and the female military personnel of the past. In this way, the Memorial creates an apparent continuum of increasing equality while simultaneously connecting contemporary female soldiers – who are often exposed to combat – with the women of the past who performed more traditionally feminine roles. The attempt to create continuity may also be seen in the practice, again, of listing female personnel in the Register, which tends to present a false uniformity of experience between the female military personnel of the past and present, feminising today's female soldiers by association. Women's participation in violence is downplayed as a tangential aspect of a narrative that primarily emphasises gains in equality and increasing civic participation. It is, of course, this narrative that has informed the state's framing of the 2013 lifting of the combat ban, noting that this

⁵⁹ For photographs of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial, please refer to Appendix B.

⁶⁰ WIMSA, 'Facts', *Women in Military Service for America Foundation, Inc.*, available at: {<http://www.womensmemorial.org/About/facts.html>} accessed 4 June 2010.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Barbara Biesecker, 'Remembering World War II: the rhetoric and politics of national commemoration in the 21st Century', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 88:4 (November 2002), pp. 402–3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

enables women to advance their military careers upon equal footing with their male counterparts,⁶⁴ as combat experience is often a prerequisite for promotion to prestigious and influential leadership positions. Breaking down barriers to be ‘allowed’ to participate in warfare is constructed as a progressive and positive social development, slowly incorporating women, in a gradual and nonthreatening manner, into the universalised norm of masculine soldier-citizenship.

The second subtly political characteristic of the Memorial is, ironically, particularly in relation to its immediately public exterior, a remarkable *lack* of women. Nowhere on the exterior of the monument are there any visual representations of women – statue or pictorial – traditionally associated with a war memorial. Instead, quotations – verbal acknowledgements – of female military personnel cover transparent, subtle, glass panels.⁶⁵ Based on the experience of the Vietnam Women’s Memorial, it is fair to suggest that this paradoxical omission is driven by the fact that attempts to visually represent military women are strongly politically loaded. To concretely depict one woman, even in a normatively unthreatening posture, such as the nurses of the Vietnam Women’s Memorial, would be to open the requirement to represent them all – not just the romantic figures of the ‘healing sisters’ of the past, but also the *de facto* combatants of today. Despite the location of the ‘Memorial’ just outside Arlington National Cemetery, the monument is far more pedagogical than commemorative in presentation and effect, with the paradoxical effect of sidelining the exposure of female military personnel to violence. If women are absent from the Women’s Memorial, so, crucially is explicit recognition of the impetus for commemoration – death. The separation between women and death drawn in the Vietnam Women’s Memorial is thus maintained. As argued previously, failing to acknowledge the contribution of women in the armed forces is untenable as a failure of nationalism, but so too is genuine recognition of women as both potential objects of violence and potentially violent subjects. In an attempt to avoid directly addressing this discursive paradox and revealing the contingency of purportedly universal/timeless societal discourses, the commemoration of female soldiers is undertaken at a highly abstract level.

Incomplete memorial and partial subjects

The result of this process of politicised, tentative memorial is that there are ‘deaths [and lives] that are partially eclipsed and partially marked’⁶⁶ as the state, the military, and the public perform their obligation to commemorate without constructing female soldiers – and, in many cases, female military personnel more generally – as legitimate subjects. In a way, then, the state acknowledges servicewomen without fully recognising their reality, their experiences and, in any direct fashion, their deaths. The conventional, presumed connection between commemoration – the official remembrance and marking of significant death(s) or events (often both) – and mourning, collective rituals relating to death and loss, so evident in relation to the deaths and conflicts of male combatants, and coalesced in the figure of the unknown soldier, is thus quietly severed.⁶⁷ These practices of partial commemoration may thus

⁶⁴ See Bulmiller and Shanker, ‘Pentagon’.

⁶⁵ WIMSA, ‘Facts’.

⁶⁶ Butler, ‘Frames’, p. 75.

⁶⁷ This point, while important, should not be overdrawn, as, obviously, fewer women have been killed in war, and even fewer as a result of combat, than men over the course of American history, thus lessening, in some ways, the necessity of organised collective mourning. That said, the comparatively lesser number

be understood as a simulacrum of the political norm of mourning, mimicking its appearance and logic while failing to engage with its substantive purpose – coping with the sociopolitical implications of death. Instead, ‘female combatant’ is virtually literally *effaced*, elided as a valid subject position, and removed from the socially intelligible. The ‘servicewomen’, who support the violent activities of male soldiers at a safe remove from the actual prosecution of conflict, officially remembered by the state are thus phantasms, figures produced by the desire of the state to preserve the illusion of a stable gender order rooted in an ethical, protective polity.

Grievability and the creation of female Soldiers as liminal figures

The ambivalence inherent to the commemorative practices of official state mourning thus presents a partial, fractured representation of what it means to be a woman in the military – an image that, from a completely different perspective, that of female soldiers and those who knew them, is itself unrecognisable. In this light, the public representations produced by the families and loved ones of deceased female soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan may be read as a form of resistance to the lack of meaningful official public engagement with the lived reality of ‘female soldiers’. In other words, the loved ones contest (either consciously or in effect) the elision and assumptions presented within the hegemonic discourse through the production of an alternative narrative, rather than through a process of direct confrontation and rebuttal. Such representations represent an attempt to render the foregone life, in its complex totality, publicly and socially intelligible – to render her *grievable*.

This section examines the construction of deceased female soldiers in one of the most powerful such representations – the obituary. According to Butler, obituaries ‘function as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed. It is the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life’.⁶⁸ Like the previously discussed monuments, moreover, obituaries ‘constitute a formal structure with the same [illusion of] permanence as a physical monument, provided that its text is preserved and disseminated’.⁶⁹ As a familiar cultural artefact with a specific structure, symbolism, and function, the text of the obituary *as an obituary* is thus symbolically communicative in and of itself, signalling remembrance, acknowledging death, and creating expectations as to content. Due to the finality of the obituary, therefore, it is, oddly, a near-perfect form of resistance, as it summarises the life of an *individual* (rather than an anonymous member of a social group), allowing loved ones to assert their version of the deceased. As a result, in bringing ostensibly private emotion and recollections of a private person into the public, the obituary is authoritative as the literal ‘last word’.

In order to best illustrate the parallel normative imperatives of gender and nationalism at work in these obituaries, therefore, the obituaries of female soldiers will then be briefly contrast with those of their male counterparts. Overall, as the following

of female casualties does not mean there were *none*, and the inability of these commemorative practice to incorporate that reality further speaks to the very ambivalence at hand.

⁶⁸ Butler, ‘Precarious’, p. 34.

⁶⁹ Please note that in the original text this insight is drawn with reference to the relationship between poetry and monuments, a logic that is extended here to encompass the obituary, another culturally specific form of textual communication in which the medium is a message in itself. Annika Demosthenous, ‘Poetry and national identity in Cyprus and Scotland’ (draft doctoral thesis, University of Oxford), p. 306 (at time of writing in 2014).

analysis will demonstrate, these attempts to render deceased female soldiers fully grievable ultimately fail, as female soldiers occupy a liminal subject-position – figures constituted as caught ‘betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial’.⁷⁰ The pressure for representational fidelity and finality inherent to the obituary is thus significantly ‘troubled’ by the indeterminacy and ambiguity inherent to liminal figures such as female soldiers, thus denying closure.

Good soldiers

The most common theme, in obituaries and public statements commemorating female soldiers, is their equality with their male counterparts in terms of function and sacrifice. People want the public to understand that their deceased loved ones also served their country with honour, and that their full contribution – including combat functions – is deserving of recognition. The obituary of Army Sgt Melissa Valles, for instance, begins by asserting that ‘Melissa Valles was a soldier through and through’, and includes a colleague’s observation that she was always ‘squared-away’ and a ‘total soldier’.⁷¹ The placement of this assertion within the overall obituary is key, as the primary descriptive section of an obituary – or the ‘tombstone’ – serves to summarise what was perceived as the salient feature of a person’s life.⁷² The very format of Valles’ obituary, therefore, even beyond the assertive language, speaks to the fact that ‘soldier’ was her primary identity. The assertion that Valles was a soldier ‘through and through’ thus makes claims about her relationship to the polity, and the meaning that ought to be ascribed to her death. ‘Soldier’ is an implicit statement of belonging, full participation/citizenship, and a call for recognition of such.

Similarly, in speaking of Second Lieutenant Emily Perez, the first African-American female officer to die in combat, her father told CNN that she was ‘every bit the military commander’ who ‘always led from the front’ because, as she told her father, ‘these are my soldiers and I have to bring them home safe’.⁷³ It is clear that Perez’s concern was to communicate that his daughter exhibited the qualities of a ‘good soldier’ – leadership, concern for others, and self-sacrifice. The obituary of Staff Sergeant Tricia L. Jameson in the Omaha World-Herald expresses a similar sentiment, as the notice begins by detailing her military service record, including a quote from her former commander who said: ‘She was a very motivated soldier ... The only thing she wanted to do was better herself and help her country’.⁷⁴ Following the death of Lt Col. Juanita Warman, her daughter gave the following statement regarding her mother: ‘she was a heroine and gave her life serving her country’.⁷⁵ Again, the defining feature of Warman’s life was her military service, which made her a ‘heroine’, and an ‘icon for national self-recognition’.⁷⁶

Overall, there is a remarkable consistency in the framing and sentiment of the many obituaries and interviews. By presenting their loved ones as ‘good soldiers’, the

⁷⁰ Turner, ‘Ritual’, p. 95.

⁷¹ Associated Press Newswires, ‘Iraq US toll capsules’, *Associated Press* (2 August 2003).

⁷² Marilyn Johnson, *The Dead Beat: Lost Souls, Lucky Stiffs, and the Perverse Pleasure of Obituaries* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), pp. 31–3.

⁷³ Soldedad O’Brien et al., ‘Republican congressman Mark Foley forced to resign; women in combat’, *CNN: American Morning*, Transcript (2 October 2006).

⁷⁴ Omaha World-Herald, ‘Paid obits’, *Omaha World-Herald* (22 July 2005).

⁷⁵ Yamiche Alcindor, ‘So much to do, so many lives to touch; highest ranking soldier killed at Fort Hood is buried at Arlington’, *Washington Post* (24 November 2009).

⁷⁶ Butler, ‘Precarious’, p. 34.

loved ones simultaneously legitimate the state the female soldiers died ostensibly defending. Crucially, as observed by Maja Zehfuss in her 2009 examination of grievability and the state-produced obituaries of British soldiers killed in Iraq, this formulation is not unique to female soldiers (nor, necessarily to the context of the United States).⁷⁷ Nor, given the given the implicit claims to a form of universalised citizenship expressed in these representations, would it be expected to be. Like the obituaries discussed above, those of male soldiers also ‘emphasize this idea – that he ‘was doing what he believed in’.⁷⁸ Of US Marine Sgt Donald Lamar Jr, killed in Afghanistan in 2010, for instance, his father states, ‘He went into it. He made the choice, and he loved what he did and did it well. He loved his country and made the ultimate sacrifice.’⁷⁹ Similarly, to give another possible example among many, the obituary of Cpl Joseph O. Behnke quotes his son as remembering the deceased’s insistence that ‘Son, there’s nothing more honourable than dying for your country.’⁸⁰ As argued by Zehfuss, ‘what is at stake’, in such obituaries, ‘is that the deaths were not meaningless’,⁸¹ but understood as patriotic and worthwhile – grievable, in other words, as national heroes. The nearly-identical framing of deceased female soldiers as ‘total soldiers’, therefore, may be read as appealing to and reflecting a particular, masculine ideal of citizenship and, through it, a claim to social intelligibility.

As such, the representational practices of the loved ones of deceased soldiers thus tend to ‘reinforce and reproduce the existing social categories’, normative structures, and ideological imperatives.⁸² Such constructions support the modern, aggressive ideal of citizenship that constitutes (and venerates) a willingness to commit/risk practices of collective violence as a prerequisite for belonging. In a counterintuitive and incidental way, then, the attempt to resist the effacement of female soldiers through an insistence on their complete military equality and participation also legitimates the status quo, albeit with a moderately expanded conceptualisation of ‘soldier’.⁸³ This implicit reproduction of the narratives of patriotic nationalism found in official state practices of commemoration highlights the difficulty in ‘untangling’ official discourse relating to heroism and myth from the individuating impulses of more personal grief.⁸⁴ With respect to the liminal position of female soldiers, however, whether such a narrative is individual or collective, as argued by Edkins, is ‘irrelevant’, as ‘how the story is told’ and (re)produces social categories is of far more significance than its precise source.⁸⁵ If anything, the intertwining of such narratives illustrates the difficulty, if not outright impossibility, of expressing a form of subjectivity independent of broader social norms of mourning and grievability.

⁷⁷ It should be noted that as this piece does not explicitly engage with the issue of gender, and very few British women (five) were killed in Operation TELIC, Zehfuss’ arguments are understood here to relate predominately to male soldiers. Maja Zehfuss, ‘Hierarchies of grief and the possibility of war: Remembering UK fatalities in Iraq’, *Millennium, Journal of International Studies*, 38 (October 2009), pp. 419–40; and ‘British military deaths in Iraq’, *BBC News UK*, available at: {<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-10637526>} accessed 23 June 2014.

⁷⁸ Zehfuss, ‘Hierarchies’, p. 431.

⁷⁹ Rusty Dennen, ‘Vigil will mark anniversary of local marine’s death’, *The FreeLance Star* (8 May 2012).

⁸⁰ The Huntsville Times, ‘Obituary: Joseph O. Behnke’, *Obits.al.com*, available at: {<http://obits.al.com/obituaries/huntsville/obituary.aspx?n=joseph-o-behnke&pid=3098299>} accessed 2 June 2014.

⁸¹ Zehfuss, ‘Hierarchies’, p. 432.

⁸² Rumelili, ‘Identities’, p. 503.

⁸³ For more on the listing of military accomplishments and personal patriotism and the furtherance of war, please refer to Zehfuss, ‘Hierarchies’, pp. 428–9.

⁸⁴ Edkins, ‘Memory’, p. 234.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Good women

In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that even these practices of subtle resistance and contestation, intended to communicate the complex totality of an individual's life, are characterised by ambivalence. The same obituaries that assert the formal equality of female soldiers with their male counterparts also, within the space of a few lines, strive to present the deceased as a good *woman*. The obituary of Sgt Valles, for example, parallels soldierly accolades with traditionally feminine qualities, noting, 'she liked to help people out', and describing her ambition of wanting 'to become an elementary school teacher' because 'she loved kids'.⁸⁶ In addition to being a good soldier, then, Valles' obituary specifically notes that she took care of others, loved children, and sought to eventually renounce her masculinised military role to pursue a more gender-appropriate profession.

This is not to say, of course, that the obituaries of male soldiers do not also exhibit a certain duality, as they too, as discussed by Zehfuss, generally construct the deceased, fairly mechanically, as both a good soldier and a good person.⁸⁷ The obituaries of male soldiers also reference their 'private' lives, status as sons and fathers and, in one unusual case, a concern for the Iraq children encountered on operations.⁸⁸ What is absent from Zehfuss' analysis, however, is the recognition that what it means to be a good person, like a good soldier, is inherently gendered, with the result that within the gendered system of war, some (masculine) identities are far easier to 'square' with soldiering than are others. As alluded to above, this is most evident in the distinction in the way military service is portrayed within the trajectory of men and women's lives. There is a strong tendency for the obituaries of male soldiers to declare the deceased died doing 'what he always wanted to do'.⁸⁹ The obituary of Army Staff Sgt Alex French IV, for instance, observes that he 'had a thing for the spinach-gobbling Popeye as a child and followed his own dream of being a sailor, joining the Navy',⁹⁰ thus casting his military service as the fulfillment of a natural, and laudable, childhood ambition. Similarly, the deceased's foregone future is often discussed in primarily military terms, as 'many of the dead are described as rising stars, marked out for early promotion'.⁹¹ Marine Sgt Donald Lamar Jr's obituary notes that 'he had just been meritoriously promoted to sergeant',⁹² while that of Staff Sgt French states, 'He had a good career ahead of him ... To have it terminated so early, it's a waste.'⁹³ Military service is thus presented as continuous, or perhaps even synonymous, with the deceased's imagined life trajectory, as both the fulfillment of a childhood dream and a vocation extending into the future. In keeping with the gendered system of war's designation of all male citizens as potentially liable to risk their lives for the polity, the deceased male soldiers are correspondingly constructed as always-already soldiers.

⁸⁶ Tille Fong, 'Profiles of courage', *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver) (19 March 2004).

⁸⁷ Zehfuss, 'Hierarchies', p. 427.

⁸⁸ Upon his death, the family of Army Spc Irving Medina noted to the press that he had 'befriended several Iraqi children in his spare time [...] including a 10-year old boy who was killed in a bombing'. Associated Press, 'Army Spc. Irving Medina', *Military Times*, available at: {<http://projects.militarytimes.com/valor/army-spc-irving-medina/256938>} accessed 2 June 2014.

⁸⁹ Zehfuss, 'Hierarchies', p. 431.

⁹⁰ Associated Press, 'Army Staff Sgt. Alex French IV', *Military Times*, available at: {<http://projects.militarytimes.com/valor/army-staff-sgt-alex-french/4306972>} accessed 2 June 2014.

⁹¹ Zehfuss, 'Hierarchies', p. 428.

⁹² Rusty Dennen, "'Marine's Marine' combat fatality", *Fredericksburg.com*, available at: {<http://fredericksburg.com/News/FLS/2010/052010/05142010/547931>} accessed 2 June 2014.

⁹³ Associated Press, 'French'.

The obituaries of deceased female soldiers, in contrast, as that of Sgt Valles above, tend to construct military service as temporary, an interruption of the normal course of their life, rather than a long-term ambition. The obituary of Marine Lance Corporal Holly A. Charette, for instance, while mentioning her cause of death and that her funeral will include full military honours, also seeks to firmly establish her conventional femininity. The notice mentions that Charette was engaged to be married, and had been both a field hockey player and cheerleader during high school. Much like Valles' death notice, Charette's obituary goes on to note that 'Holly loved to dance and have fun and always made time for kids in her life', observing that her professional ambition had been 'to become a child psychologist'.⁹⁴ The implied tragedy here, then, is not the foregone promise of a glorious military career, but rather that Charette will not now have the opportunity to *exit* the military. It is strongly implied that Charette's ambition, instead, was to have children, placing her at an even further remove from the spectre of death associated with the military. Despite having been a Marine, therefore, Charette was heterosexual, maternal, and engaged in conventionally feminine activities, with traditionally feminine ambitions. Once again, military service is presented as a temporary means to an end, rather than a vocation. The obituary of Sgt Trista L. Moretti, similarly, generally filled with reiterations of her love for the military and, unusually, 'the life she chose', still remarks that 'for a while, she wanted to become a teacher',⁹⁵ indicating that despite her masculine profession, she possessed feminine tendencies.

Overall, it is not so much the content of the obituaries of deceased male and female soldiers that differs as the emphasis and presentation. Everyone is presented as a competent, patriotic soldier, a family member, and kind person. This is in keeping with Butler's observation of the strong hetero-normative imperative 'in the genre of obituary, where lives are quickly tidied up and summarized, humanized, usually married, or on the way to be, heterosexual, happy, and monogamous'.⁹⁶ The distinction, then, lies in the commensurability of the essentialised gendered subjectivities inherent to the 'good personhood' constructed in the various obituaries with the assumptions of the gendered system of war. The temporal representation of men as always-already in the military, whereas women are generally portrayed as 'passing through' speaks to the subtle designation of their primary identity. Female soldiers are, first and foremost, *women*, whereas the gender identity of men is folded into the universalised, unmarked ideal of the citizen-soldier, thus constructing them as 'soldiers first'. The naturalised (and, obviously, essentialist) association of men, the military, and the exposure to violence within the gendered system of war thus reinforces the grievability of male soldiers, as a particular form of legitimately vulnerable (or even expendable) subject – the 'good soldier'.⁹⁷

Liminal subjects

The following final, near paradigmatic example of the general trend in the representation of deceased female soldiers highlights the comparatively greater

⁹⁴ Providence Journal, 'Obituaries-Coventry-Charette', *Providence Journal* (30 June 2005).

⁹⁵ Beverly Reid, 'Army Sgt. Trista Moretti, June 25 2007', *Star-Ledger* (27 June 2007).

⁹⁶ Butler, 'Precarious', p. 32; Edkins, 'Memory', p. 240.

⁹⁷ It is thus completely possible, though unnecessary, to exist as a 'good male soldier', as from the perspective of normative social intelligibility, if one is the latter, one is also, by definition, the former. For more on this point, see Zehfuss, 'Hierarchies', p. 439.

difficulty in reconciling the gender identity of women with their chosen profession. The obituary for Staff Sergeant Lillian Clamens notes 'her endearing personality, radiant smile, and caring demeanour warmed the hearts of everyone that came in contact with her', once again, traditionally feminine virtues. The death announcement goes on to assert that despite the absences often required by military service, 'at home she was a devoted wife, fantastic mother, and the center of the family'.⁹⁸ The distinction drawn here is both crucial and archetypal; in different contexts, Clamens was a different person, in Iraq she was a 'good soldier', in America she was a 'good woman'. In her person, Clamens embodied the public/private divide, as her civic duties were performed in the universal, public and masculine realm while 'at home' she was a paragon of femininity. Just as the previous constructions of 'good soldier' supported the legitimacy of the state by reifying the connection between citizenship and (potential) violence, the above representations of femininity similarly reinforce a particularly static and essentialist understanding of gender, and what it is to be a woman.

The construction of deceased female soldiers by their friends, families, and colleagues (and framing by the media) thus demonstrates an ambivalence that is largely absent from the obituaries of their male counterparts. Within one obituary, two different subjects are created – the deceased as a 'good soldier', worthy of respect and living up to the masculine standards of the profession, and as a 'good woman', caring, maternal, and sufficiently feminine so as to fit into a conventional hetero-normative kinship structure. In none of these accounts, however, as in state discourse they implicitly resist, is a representation of a 'good female soldier' – as a unified subject position – provided. As exemplified by the obituary of Lillian Clamens, female soldiers appear to be mediating the public/private divide, and state/society relationship, through the performance of distinct subject positions by the same body/figure. Within the existing patriarchal, nationalistic normative structures of society, one can be a 'good soldier' or a 'good woman', but encompassing the totality of the experience of being a 'good female soldier', for the moment, appears implausible. As a result, those who would seek to be identified (in life or in death) as a 'good female soldier' are unintelligible within the existing social imaginary, rendering them liminal figures, hovering between the dual normative imperatives of 'soldier' and 'woman'. In their inability to represent 'good female soldier' as a unified subject-position, and a life it is possible to have lived, the representations of deceased female soldiers produced by their loved ones in the form of obituary are thus ultimately unable to present an alternative to the phantasms commemorated by the state, instead reproducing their same gendered logic. Correspondingly, the ambivalence inherent to such representations renders female soldiers, in all their intersectional complexity, ungrivable within the confines of the social intelligible.

Conclusion

Overall, this article has sought to demonstrate that within the highly gendered system of warfare, female military personnel are caught between the dual normative imperatives of nationalism, which venerates a particular sacrificial ideal of universalised soldier-citizenship, and patriarchy, which assigns men and women differentiated social roles based upon essentialised understandings of militarised

⁹⁸ Lillian L. Clamens, *Miami Sun-Herald* and *Legacy.com*, available at: {<http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/herald/obituary.aspx?n=lillian-l-clamens&pid=96313076>} accessed 5 June 2010.

masculinity and pacific, maternal femininity. As a result, while female soldiers are (imperfectly) publicly commemorated, as evidenced by the Vietnam Women's and Women in Military Service for America memorials, and (rarely) mourned, at least at this time, despite the personal articulations of remembrance and resistance by their loved ones in the form of obituaries, they cannot, be rendered fully grievable.

This inability of female soldiers to be specifically and exhaustively categorised within the normative structures of nationalism and patriarchal gender, moreover, is a source of uncertainty and fear, leading the dead, paradoxically, to be implicitly understood as threatening the existing social order.⁹⁹ The generalised fear, in other words, of death is concretised into a fear of an uncategorisable figure.¹⁰⁰ The liminal process of mourning, in its conventional sense, is thus derailed. Rather than constituting a temporary suspension of 'normality' to allow for the emotional processing of loss, the inability of loved ones (and, in a sense, society as a whole) to properly represent the totality of the experience and identity of female soldier renders the practice of incomplete mourning a form of trauma in and of itself. The constructions inherent to such imperfect and insufficient mourning are then refracted even in the practices of resistance arising spontaneously from the more personal bereavement and grief. The pain attendant to the impossibility of closure following any traumatic loss is thus redoubled in the loss of a liminal subject, as the failure of representation precludes the bereaved's complete 're-entry' into society. As such, this article argues, the subject of what Maria Mälksoo terms the 'liminal ordeal' is also ambivalent. In most cases, the liminal ordeal is considered to be experienced by the liminal figures themselves, a formulation which in this case is complicated by the fact that the troubling figures are dead, but which might fairly be extended to incorporate the living liminal – female veterans.¹⁰¹

The liminality of, particularly, the dead soldiers, and the pressure for closure therein, however, constitutes a source of stress for the loved ones of the deceased, state authorities, and broader society, dramatically extending the reach of the 'liminal ordeal'. This experience of trauma – be it the personal loss of an 'uncategorisable' loved one or the societal confrontation of women's participation in combat – thus exposes 'the arbitrary, contingent and ungrounded status of both authority structures and individual subjectivities',¹⁰² reinforcing the sense of ontological insecurity the practices of mourning are meant to stem. Mourning and grief, therefore, are reconstituted not as coping mechanisms, but rather a continuation of trauma.

The extent to which the US armed forces' recent, and halting, policy changes toward women in combat will affect this bifurcated, liminal construction of female soldiers, and attendant experience of indefinite trauma, remains to be seen. Liminality, of course, is often a more or less temporary condition, which later results in the adjustment of existing discourse, and the accommodation of the challenging figure within the social.¹⁰³ As illustrated by this article, the problems of

⁹⁹ For more on the connection between liminality, fear and the perception of threat, please refer to Turner, 'Ritual', pp. 108–9 and Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul Limited, 1969), pp. 1–7.

¹⁰⁰ See Bahar Rumelili, 'Liminal identities and processes of domestication and subversion in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 38:2 (April 2002), p. 496; Neumann, 'Introduction', p. 477.

¹⁰¹ For an interesting perspective on the ordeal of living liminality of a different order – that of returned survivors of Soviet camps – and its relation to broader social grievability, please refer to Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead from the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

¹⁰² Edkins, 'Memory', p. 245.

¹⁰³ See Mälksoo, 'Liminality', p. 487; Turner, 'Ritual', pp. 94–5.

representation posed by female combatants to the normative/ideological structure of the American polity presupposes particularly narrow, and rigid, constructions of what it is to be a citizen, a soldier, and a woman (and, of course, a man). The increasing, if disjointed and reluctant, inclusion of women in the direct conduct of combat across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries suggests that in times of emergency and material need, the rigours of the gendered system of war may be relaxed. This, in turn, may ease the ambivalence inherent to grief, and allow for the representation to the totality of 'female soldier' in state mourning rituals, ameliorating the trauma of the liminal ordeal. The maintenance of the rigid subject positions of 'soldier' and 'woman', however, suggests that rather than leading to discursive openness or increased fluidity of identity, female soldiers are instead left in the unenviable position of living and dying a tense, artificial dichotomy which in turn reinforces the problematic constructions that constrain them.

Appendix A: Vietnam Women's Memorial





Photos: *Courtesy Amissa Jablonski*

Appendix B: Women in Military Service for America Memorial





Photos: *Courtesy Amissa Jablonski*