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Young people's emotional and embodied encounters with everyday militarism at the UK's Armed Forces Day

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Abstract

The UK Government's 2025 Strategic Defence Review emphasises the significant role public engagement activities such as Armed Forces Day (AFD) play in inspiring future generations and increasing recruitment into the armed forces and defence industry more broadly. In contrast to existing literature, this article foregrounds the perspectives, experiences, and emotions of young people (aged 16-17) before, during, and after their engagements with an AFD event held in a city in northern England, in June 2025. We demonstrate what their perspectives contribute to existing research on AFD, and understandings of the workings of everyday militarism more broadly. We emphasise young people's sensitivity to the ways AFD worked to generate certain 'communities of feeling' (Basham, 2016a) through their emotional and embodied engagements with various (non)human bodies and practices associated with the military. The sometimes conflicting emotions of excitement and unease generated by the event led young people to reflect on how they were made to feel included and/or excluded during the course of AFD. The nuances in young people's experiences that we chart in this article illustrate the importance of engaging their varied experiences of everyday militarism. Given contemporary concerns with the UK's (in)security in a geopolitically unstable world, and the imperative to increase defence spending with implications for processes of

militarisation ‘at home and abroad’, we argue that this is a critical moment to examine the subjectivities of young people who increasingly will be the targets of recruitment drives for the UK’s armed forces.

Introduction

In 2025 the UK government’s Ministry of Defence published its Strategic Defence Review (SDR) entitled: *Making Britain Safer: Secure at home, strong abroad*, which sets out the multiple challenges posed to Britain’s national security, and how the UK armed forces will look to respond. In his introduction to the SDR, the Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer noted ‘a step-change in the threats we face’ that provides the rationale for a commitment to ‘the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the Cold War’ (Ministry of Defence, 2025a, 2). Global instability and the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, ‘including war in Europe, growing Russian aggression, new nuclear risks, and daily cyber-attacks at home’ are among some of the major threats to the UK presented in the report (ibid, 3). While the SDR is ripe for analysis of the UK’s foreign policy priorities going forward, it also sets out the domestic implications of this marked increase in defence spending. The authors of the SDR state:

‘With multiple threats and challenges facing us now, and in the future, a *whole-of-society* approach is essential. Everyone has a role to play and a national conversation on how we do it is required’ (our emphasis, Ministry of Defence, 2025a, 9).

A rather clunky catch-all definition, the whole-of-society approach espoused in the SDR practically encompasses a commitment to, among other measures, expand Cadet Forces by 30% by 2030 and work with the Department of Education to develop greater understanding of the armed forces among young people. The stated intention is to engage industry, civil society, academia, education, and communities, with the objective of reconnecting society and the UK’s armed forces, as well as ‘renewing the Nation’s contract with those who serve’ (ibid, 4). Another key element of this reconnection, and its associated drive to recruit and inspire future generations of defence personnel, is the organisation of public engagement activities such as Armed Forces Day (henceforth AFD).

Introduced in 2009, AFD was initially a response to concerns regarding society’s (waning) connection to and interaction with the UK military (Danilova, 2015). These concerns about

relations between the British military establishment and society and the need to rekindle that relationship have resurfaced more recently (if indeed they ever went away). AFD has subsequently attracted the attention of scholars engaging with Critical Military Studies as a tangible example of everyday militarism that brings to light ‘the entanglements of military and civilian worlds’ (Rech and Yarwood, 2019, 193; see also Danilova, 2015; McGarry, 2022; Morgan-Owen et al., 2024). This work has usefully interrogated ‘how such events envelop those who attend in coercive military logics, values, practices and experiences, beyond that which are most obviously hawkish recruitment vehicles’ (McGarry, 2022, 274). These studies, then, have yielded important theoretical and empirical insights about AFD but have relied heavily on auto-ethnographic and observational approaches that tell us little about how these events are experienced by the general public, and in particular young people. Drawing on inspiration from the methodological approach of Pennell (2020), the research we present in this article foregrounds the perspectives, experiences, and emotions of young people (aged 16-17) before, during, and after their engagements with an AFD event held in a city in northern England, in June 2025. Our approach conceptualises young people as active geopolitical agents who ‘are not predetermined by [militarisms’] circulations, but engage with and through them; they are not merely militarised, they participate in the making of their own identities in relation to militarisms’ (Beier, 2011, 10).

Importantly, we move beyond simply advocating for the inclusion of young people’s experiences, by demonstrating what their perspectives contribute to existing research on AFD, and understandings of the workings of everyday militarism more broadly. We emphasise young people’s sensitivity to the ways AFD *worked* to generate certain ‘communities of feeling’ (Basham, 2016a) through their emotional and embodied engagements with various (non)human bodies and practices associated with the military. The sometimes conflicting emotions of excitement and unease generated by the event led young people to reflect on how they were made to feel included and/or excluded during the course of AFD. The nuances in young people’s experiences that we chart in this article illustrate the importance of engaging their varied experiences of everyday militarism. Given contemporary concerns with the UK’s (in)security in a geopolitically unstable world, and the imperative to increase defence spending with implications for processes of militarisation ‘at home and abroad’, we argue that

this is a critical moment to examine the subjectivities of young people who increasingly will be the targets of recruitment drives for the UK's armed forces.

The article proceeds by situating our contribution to research on AFD within wider debates concerning everyday militarism and related processes of militarisation, and in particular their intersections with childhood and youth. We then outline the research study and discuss some of the methodological tensions associated with our approach, before presenting the empirical material and concluding with a call for more academic work on how young people diversely experience, engage, critique and resist events like AFD.

Literature review

Scholarship that interrogates the ways that space and society are shaped by military presence has burgeoned in the last 30 odd years and more recently the journal *Critical Military Studies* has been a key vanguard for pushing forward these research agendas (Basham et al., 2015; Enloe, 1989, 2000; Woodward, 2004). Conceptually, this work makes an important distinction that also informs our study, between militarism, typically framed as 'an *ideology* that prioritises military force as a necessary resolver of conflict' (Woodward, 2014, 41) or, more simply, 'a set of *attitudes* of society about military effectiveness' (Hoban, 2021, 109) and, 'militarisation that refers to the *process* of expansion and absorption of these beliefs, military practices, modes of organisation, and discourses' (ibid, 109). Of course, these concepts are interlinked given that, for instance, socio-political attitudes about the military feed into the rationale for, and organisation of, events like AFD, that in turn affect the particular processes, practices, and performances of militarisation that people are invited to engage with. The military, then, has been shown to infuse everyday milieus in a range of different ways exposing how, 'militarisation takes root in the banal processes of daily life' (Dowler, 2012, 497; Burridge and McSorley, 2013). Rather than seeing this as a unidirectional process imposed by the state on society (Morgan-Owen et al., 2024), research has emphasised the enmeshing of civilian and military worlds (Rech and Yarwood, 2019; Spanu, 2023) that are part of 'the social and daily labour that makes state violence possible' (Basham, 2024, 143). Building on key interventions from McSorley (2013, 2014) and others (see Avoine and Imrie-Miller, 2026), this work has emphasised how 'the analysis of militarism needs to be attentive

to its embodied, sensory, and affective dimensions’ (McSorley, 2014, 119) if we are to interrogate how militarism is experienced, felt, and negotiated in everyday life. In this way militarisation is conceptualised as ‘something that simultaneously produces and is produced...embedded, embodied, emotional, and woven into the fabric of our societies’ (Basham, 2024, 143). In particular, Basham underlines the emotional charge triggered by these sometimes subtle forms of militarism that can incite, induce, and seduce in order to enable/disable particular socio-political actions (ibid, 142).

In a similar vein, work exploring the intersections between the military and the lives of children and young people has shifted to examine what Beier (2011, 10) refers to as the ‘subtle and oft times surprising circulations’ of militarism beyond ‘hot’ zones of conflict. As a response to existing academic research on militarisation and childhood that tended to focus narrowly on child soldiers in the ‘Global South’, subsequent research foregrounds the ways militarised practices are normalised in the lives of all children and young people (Beier, 2011, 2020a; Beier and Berents, 2023; D’Costa et al., 2015). This work has subsequently sought to explore ‘how children [and young people] variously interact with, interpret, reproduce, and subvert aspects of these circulations’ associated with militarism’ (Beier and Tabak, 2020, 282). Importantly, then, this literature and related studies engaging with critical geopolitics (e.g. Benwell and Hopkins, 2016; Hörschelmann, 2008) has centred children’s and young people’s subjectivities rather than seeing them as passive receptors or objects of militarisation (Beier and Tabak, 2020, 283). It has also sensitively considered complex questions about agency that take into consideration the power dynamics of the spaces and practices through which young people engage the military (Nguyen, 2022; Huynh, 2015). For instance, Pennell (2020) and Benwell (2021) have noted the constraining influence on expressions of young people’s agency caused by the presence of past and present members of the armed forces on battlefield tours and in school classrooms respectively. Notwithstanding these restrictions, young people are not unthinking and uncritical and instead find ways to push back and resist given their capacity ‘to nuance, interpret differently, adapt and effect change’ to varying degrees across diverse settings (Alexander et al., 2024, 167; Carter and Woodyer, 2023). Reflective of this tension, Basham (2020, 139) highlights how young people ‘simultaneously are geopolitical actors as well as subjects upon whom geopolitics is enacted’, with their

capacities for agentic expression ‘fully caught up in complex webs of power’ (Woon, 2017, 202).

There is also the potentially uncomfortable (for those identifying as scholars of Critical Military Studies) but no less important acknowledgement that agency can be expressed in multiple ways and that young people are ‘complex social actors who might as readily align themselves *with* power, privilege, and injustice as against it’ (Beier, 2020b, 230). In short, this is recognition that young people can be ‘active agents either in [militarisation’s] promulgation or prevention’ (Watson, 2011, 46). The following discussion of our empirical data demonstrates the diversity of young people’s perspectives about the military, AFD, and military recruitment that are based on their experiential, emotional, and embodied engagements with the event. We show how young people can be swept up in the excitement and ‘fun’ of militarised events like AFD; they can be encouraged to ‘support the troops’, while at the same time express reservations about interactions that they witnessed (Millar, 2022). Importantly, our methodological approach offered young people the opportunity to talk through and debate their experiences and feelings after engaging with AFD, which emphasised their diverse subjectivities that were sometimes shaped through dialogue with their peers.

The explicit and implicit militarisation of so-called ‘family-friendly’ events ‘where narratives about the armed forces can be popularised and shared with wider society’ have attracted interest (Morgan-Owen et al., 2024, 527). This work has provided critique of civilian run activities for children and young people that ‘playfully’ incorporate militaristic practices and routines (Hörschelmann, 2016), through to overtly militarised events like airshows (Rech, 2016, 2020), remembrance rituals (Danilova and Dolan, 2020; Liddle, 2023; Pennell, 2020), and AFD (Danilova, 2015; McGarry, 2022; Morgan-Owen et al., 2024; Rech and Yarwood, 2019). These scholars have examined and taken seriously the assemblage of actors, materialities, and practices in evidence at these events, as well as the ‘fleeting and sometimes unpredictable encounters’ with the military that they can generate (Rech, 2020, 1077). The inception of AFD in 2009 was initially a response to the perceived erosion of ‘the public’s “familiarity” with and “understanding” of the British military’ (Rech and Yarwood, 2019, 195). In a 2025 parliamentary debate in the days running up to AFD, the apparent disjuncture between society and the armed forces was once again a subject of deep apprehension among

politicians, captured in the following extract taken from a statement delivered by Luke Pollard, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Defence:

‘As a society, we need to value our armed forces more, recognising that we all have a role in building resilience and improving how our nation is defended, but we must also recognise that armed forces personnel need to feel more valued by the whole of society...As we set about reconnecting the nation to its military, we must remember that service and sacrifice are not values confined to the history books; they are just as important today as they have ever been, and they are just as visible if we tell their stories. Those values are embodied in Britain’s armed forces. There has never been a more important time to thank them for the fantastic work they do, or to promote the benefits of an armed forces career to young people.’ (Parallel Parliament, 2025, np.)

AFD’s role in the government’s ‘whole-of society’ approach is clearly defined above through its potential to a) help address low morale among members of the armed forces who do not feel valued by society (Ministry of Defence, 2025b); b) advertise military career opportunities to young people in order to boost recruitment at a time when defence spending is being significantly increased; and c) reconnect the nation’s citizenry with its military by ‘celebrating’ the values of service and sacrifice that collapse temporal distinctions between past and present (see Morgan-Owen et al., 2024).

Research has placed AFD events under critical scrutiny by considering their spatialities and how they position those engaging with them ‘either knowingly or unknowingly, in ambiguous space between that considered “civilian” and “military”’ (McGarry, 2022, 274). Others have noted the problematic rendering of military practices as fun entertainment (or militainment, see Stahl, 2009) through such events, as well as the central role that children and young people play in them both as participants (for example, role demonstrations or parades conducted by members of Cadet Forces) and attendees often alongside other family members (Rech and Yarwood, 2019). Danilova (2015) has underlined the recruitment logics that ultimately underpin AFD through presenting a range of interactive militarised activities directed at young people and the wider public that aim to idealise the military, while eliding the realities and thorny ethical questions bound up with warfare (Danilova and Dolan, 2020; Rech, 2020). Indeed, in the contemporary moment when the imperative to increase defence

spending is particularly strong, AFD is overtly instrumentalised by British politicians as a recruitment tool for the armed forces, as well as for British defence industries and technology companies (Parallel Parliament, 2025). The broader geopolitics of these military supply chains see defence companies based in the UK implicated in the delivery of hardware to foreign militaries with catastrophic consequences for civilian populations in Gaza and other conflict zones around the world (see El-Shewy et al., 2024). This body of literature, and work on remembrance more broadly, has identified the challenges to resisting militarised rituals inherent to events like AFD characterised by their ‘festival-like atmosphere’ and their seemingly playful presentation of the entanglements of war/recreation, military/civilian pursuits (Millar, 2022; Rech and Yarwood, 2019). Notwithstanding these difficulties, in 2025 ForcesWatch (2025) reported a ‘record number of demonstrations and other actions to challenge AFD...for its uncritical portrayal of the armed forces and warfare’.

The research undertaken on AFD, then, has yielded important critiques and insights that have largely stemmed from the observations and experiences of academic researchers’ personal encounters with diverse iterations of the event across the UK. These auto-ethnographic accounts have provided much of the intellectual inspiration and curiosity for our research, however, it left us wanting to know more about how other attendees experience AFD. While on the one hand children and young people are key protagonists in how AFD ‘works’ (see Beier and Tabak, 2020), and are constructed by the state as vital to ensuring security futures, on the other they are routinely marginalised in ‘grown-up’ debates concerning geopolitics, security and militarism (Hörschelmann, 2016, 29; Beier, 2011; Benwell and Hopkins, 2016). In our research we deliberately foreground how young people ‘encounter and engage with militarism in their everyday lives’ (Hörschelmann, 2016, 30-31) by exploring their emotional, embodied, and experiential interactions with the 2025 AFD event.

The research project

The research we present in this article stems from a small-scale study in which we worked with 13 young people (10 female and 3 male) aged 16-17. The young people attended a large mixed-sex, sixth-form college in northern England, located in the city centre. The college recruits from around 100 high schools in the region and consists of a multicultural intake that

welcomes students of all faiths or none. As the college is solely a post-16 provider, data was not available for the percentage of students considered disadvantaged (in England this is counted as those available for pupil premium, extra-funding for schools based on those from low-income backgrounds or who experienced local authority care, and is a common marker used for measuring disadvantage in schools with under-16s). Given the centrality of class to British military recruitment campaigns (Basham, 2016b), greater analytical engagement with the socio-political and intersectional identities of young people would be valuable for future research on their encounters with everyday militarism but was not recorded as part of this study. The project design was informed by ethical principles set out by those undertaking research in the social studies of childhood and youth (see Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Christensen and Prout, 2002; Hopkins, 2010) and was given institutional ethical approval by Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee.

After explaining the project to a particularly engaged teacher and then the college principal, a 20-minute interactive session was arranged in which we introduced the research to around 60 young people across three A-Level Politics classes. The limited sample size of the study and our focused recruitment from these specific subject classes, mean that our findings are not necessarily representative of young people as a whole. The session explained why we were interested in listening to young people's perspectives, the topic's relevance in light of the SDR and recent announcements about increases to defence spending, as well as the time commitment involved in participating in the project. As scholars sympathetic to critical takes on militarisation there was a strong temptation to foreground the ways the day has been critiqued and countered. However, we also wanted to avoid influencing the young people's responses and were conscious of their likely multiple and complex subjectivities vis-à-vis the military. Thus, we decided to present a 'factual' account of what AFD entails by drawing on materials and quotes from the AFD and City Council websites respectively, as well as highlighting some of the ways the event has been opposed using a quote and image from the Peace Pledge Union website. The verbal contributions from the young people during the time set aside for informal discussion and questions further demonstrated their curiosity, criticality, as well as the plurality of their views about the military. Information sheets and consent forms for young people and their parent/guardian were then distributed and signed by those interested in taking part ahead of the project commencing. Informed consent was

sought from the young people throughout the course of the project including permission to record the final focus groups and to use quotes in academic publications. Confidentiality has been assured by using pseudonyms and withholding any information that could compromise the identification of respondents. All the respondents were given a £25 voucher to thank them for taking the time to participate in the research.

The project commenced with an hour-long interactive session that focused on getting the young people to consider the different practices and performances they might observe at AFD, as well as encouraging them to be attentive to their emotional responses and the atmospheres generated by the event. We employed a methodological approach that attempted to capture the 'messy embodied and sensate interactions with people, places and artefacts' that characterise AFD (McGarry, 2022, 293; Pink, 2015). To do this, the young people were introduced to a suite of different observational methods (i.e. photography, voicenote recordings, field notes and sketches) they might use on the day and encouraged to incorporate their own approaches via a brief practical observation exercise in the classroom. Finally, the young people were prompted to consider ethics and how they might protect people's identities in any recordings they made of the day. The next stage of the project saw young people attend and engage with AFD itself. They were asked to meet Anna before the event started for a short briefing and informed that she would remain in the same location should they need assistance. Observation of the event was then undertaken in pairs or small groups and the respondents were encouraged to share their field notes, photographs, sketches, and recordings later that day by uploading them to a private virtual bulletin board or emailing them to the researchers, if they felt comfortable doing so. The following weekday, two focus groups were conducted with the young people (with their school teacher taking an active role in asking questions) to reflect on their experiences of AFD, during which some of the observational materials that had been shared with the researchers were used (with permission) as conversation prompts. The focus groups were transcribed and analysed employing inductive thematic coding, and considered alongside the observational field notes of young people and the researchers.

While a comprehensive discussion of the methodological tensions bound up with our approach to researching AFD with/alongside young people is beyond the scope of this article, we wish to underline a couple of key points. Firstly, inviting young people to engage directly

with an exemplar of everyday militarism generated fraught emotions for us as researchers. Were we complicit in facilitating practices of military recruitment and broader processes of militarisation? To alleviate this tension, we ensured that diverse views about AFD were aired, shared and listened to by the respondents at all stages of the project (from the introductory session through to the focus groups) to avoid one-sided accounts dominating and to encourage collective reflection on what is a complex socio-political event. The extracts from the focus groups that we cite below are illustrative of the different positions the young people took in relation to their experiences of the day, as well as their willingness to listen to one another. Secondly, in line with existing scholarship exploring children's and young people's engagements with (geo)politics, we conceptualise young people as active agents, albeit situated within diverse socio-spatial contexts with different power geometries that can determine their agential expression. Taken seriously, then, this means opening to the possibilities of young people expressing views that we might find uncomfortable or controversial (Vanderbeck, 2008; Watson, 2011), rather than conforming to or reinforcing our political ideals and proclivities as researchers. This is clearly not a simple tension to negotiate and requires considerable sensitivity and reflection with regards to the research design and methodological approach. Overall, we contend that our experimental approach to studying AFD with/alongside young people, sheds light on the rich and novel insights they can bring to our understandings of how everyday militarism 'works' and how these processes are diversely experienced by those who are arguably the targets of such events (Danilova, 2015).

'It's just a bit of a joke, isn't it?' Young people's emotional engagements with the military

The focus groups conducted after the young people had attended AFD were revealing of the range of emotions generated by their, and observations of others', engagements with different military bodies, objects, activities, and choreographed performances. Their testimonies demonstrate varied and sometimes conflictual embodied and emotional responses ranging from being swept up in the fun and spectacle of their encounters with military bodies, being troubled by others they witnessed, to feelings of unease at things that were left unsaid during the course of the day. One of the things that attracted extended discussion in both focus groups was the presence of fancy dress toy soldiers who circulated around the event and posed for photographs with attendees:

Anna: For the benefit of the recording, can you describe what we're looking at [referring to a photograph taken by one of the young people]?

Yasna: We're looking at toy army soldiers dressed in green – and you've probably seen them in a movie before, *Toy Story*. Isaac is just stood in the middle, holding one of their prop guns.

Isaac: Yeah, just sort of taking a picture and just playing around – it's just a bit of a joke, isn't it? Yeah.

Ali: It shows the engagement that they had there with other people and lots of the young people and stuff as well.

Teacher: Were these two figures engaging with the crowd quite a lot?

Isaac: Yeah we didn't really have to approach them. They sort of just waddled over and then we found ourselves with them. Then I had to get them to take a picture.

Teacher: How did the public react to them? Did you notice?

Isaac: Quite funny. Everyone was just enjoying it. They weren't speaking. They were silent the whole time and just sort of making actions. It was just funny really. And everyone sort of thought that. Everyone was just enjoying them two just moving about.

Teacher: Why do you think they had them there?

Ali: I feel like it could be like to really engage younger kids and everything. Because I feel like when kids see stuff like that, they're engaging and they're going to be more interested in it, if you get what I mean.

Isaac: Yeah it makes it like a family event, doesn't it? When you've got stuff like that. It's just funny. Rather than it just all being about do you want to join this, do you want to join that? There's funny activities to get involved in, and that's why you'd have things like that. (Focus group 2, 30/06/25)

In the above example, the young people reference their playful encounters with fancy dress toy soldiers that served to add some fun and humour to their experience of AFD (Danilova, 2015). Scholars working across different contexts have highlighted play and the playful ways children and young people encounter and negotiate war, (geo)political violence, and militarism in their daily lives (Carter and Woodyer, 2023; Malik, 2020; Woodyer and Carter, 2018). Carter and Woodyer (2023, 163) warn against fixing pre-determined meanings to these playful encounters and instead call for an appreciation of 'how play, as an embodied practice, exceeds representation and rationality'. While Isaac suggests the toy soldiers were deployed to present the military recruitment logics underpinning AFD in alternative ways, others simply revelled in the excitement of having the mobile toy soldiers approach them for a photo opportunity. The encounter illustrates the ways this iteration of AFD utilised mobile – as opposed to solely static stalls that attendees could choose to approach, which were incidentally also in evidence – and recognisable (especially to children and young people) militarised bodies from the film *Toy Story* that enabled the production of social media friendly posts/photographs to be circulated more widely. This was indicative of the buzz and fascination generated by other military routines (e.g. parades and marching bands) and objects including a mock WWII aircraft that dominated the showground and that were referenced in the focus groups as something young people wanted to get photographs with 'because everyone else was doing it' (Laila). The contentious decision to ban military equipment from a 2025 AFD event in York as a result of pressure from pacifist groups, is further illustrative of the agentic capacities of military objects and the central role they were considered to play in generating excitement and curiosity among the general public (Croft, 2025). There are, then, certain affective atmospheres of fun, fascination, and humour generated by these militarised bodies, objects, and spectacles that arouse intrigue and interest among young attendees of AFD, and these have the potential to ripple beyond the event itself via social media (Anderson, 2009; Closs Stephens, 2015).

The presence of ex-military personnel was another aspect of AFD that young people identified as noteworthy, stirring visceral emotions of reverence and solidarity that, at the same time, triggered more troubling and problematic questions about military service, recruitment and armed conflict. Millar's (2022) interrogation of what she terms 'support the troops' discourse prevalent in the US and UK in the wake of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan usefully theorises this

disjuncture. Using the concept of the 'liberal military contract', Millar (2022, 18) shows how the supportive citizen is obliged to disconnect the waging of racialized, neo-imperial wars from the seemingly moral, natural and apolitical support and solidarity that must be shown for 'our troops'. The simplistic and polarising frames within which veterans are often represented – as heroes and/or victims – have also received considerable critical analysis (e.g. Bulmer and Eichler, 2017; Bulmer and Jackson, 2015; Caddick, 2018), as has the power of ex-military bodies to evoke particular emotions 'that annihilate the possibility for critique' (Cree and Caddick, 2019, 261; Basham, 2016a; Pennell, 2020).

Some of the young people talked about being 'amazed' by the presence of veterans at AFD giving them the opportunity to engage 'actual people who are part of it, and they're here, real-time, with us' (Ben). Others talked about the sense of respect the event generated both for past *and* currently serving members of the armed forces stating, for instance, that 'it made me respect them more, because I learnt a lot more about what it is and how much it takes, and the respect that other people give them' (Ali). These emotions of reverence and respect were, however, tempered by reminders of the realities of war triggered by the very presence of veterans and charities providing emotional and mental health support for ex-service personnel:

Mira: I noticed there was a stall for mental health for veterans/soldiers who've just come back home. I thought that was really important because it shows that they're in solidarity with the people who are suffering with mental... there's a lot of loneliness, I'm assuming, when you're going by yourself to a new place, and then you're just leaving your family and your friends behind...which I think is really emotional. But yes so like mental health support for people like him, or people who just feel misplaced in their heads after war. [...]

Alice: I make a point about supporting veterans and people in the military. I understand why we need it, but I don't agree with the military – primarily because I don't agree with war, because of all the civilian losses, all the harm it causes to the forces, and the fact that the people who make the decision to go to war are never

the ones who are actually fighting it. Oftentimes it's young boys, and obviously now it would be young women, and it would be like the poorer citizens...But I will always support veterans and people in the military, because my personal opinions on the military itself is not a reflection on them.

Layla: I think it was a bit weird in the sense of how [AFD] was targeted a lot to younger people, but I do understand why it was there [in the city centre], especially with the mental health, the charities to help veterans – I completely agree with, that's an amazing thing to do. But the recruitment side of it, seemed a bit more misleading. Not completely lying, not like that. But as in... you were saying as in trying to bring the fear factor out of it, even though it is very scary to be part of the military.

(Extracts from focus groups 1 and 2, 30/06/25)

In their responses during both focus groups, the young people talked positively about seeing veterans and charity stalls that offered after-service care of different forms. Referring to the emotions generated by the bodies of wounded veterans in particular, Cree and Caddick (2019, 261) highlight, 'the political effects of this emotional conditioning in fostering attachments and affinities towards the state and notions of patriotism and solidarity with the nation'. While this emotional conditioning or what Millar (2022) terms 'solidaristic martiality' was in evidence to an extent for some young people, others had more nuanced views and were able to separate and critique the different aspects and activities that featured at AFD. For example, the second and third extracts above highlight young people's misgivings about the recruitment logics underlying the event – targeting working class young men and women – and its concealment of the 'scary' realities of military service (Basham, 2016b).

Finally, the young people commented on the numerous instances where they saw young children targeted or encouraged to engage with military paraphernalia during the course of AFD:

Isla: I saw children walking with replica firearms, climbing onto tanks and planes for pictures, often with little guidance on the realities of military service or the

consequences of armed conflict. This can normalise violence or reinforce militaristic values. (Student fieldnotes, 29/06/25)

Alice: That's where I found the young boys with the gear on and stuff – I found it rather interesting...I just thought it was a bit iffy to me, because it was like... obviously young kids don't understand the reality of a lot of things, but it's like further glorifying the military..., and it's like this kid isn't going to understand. I'm not saying the kids are going to go and join the military because of this. But they're not going to fully understand what that is. I just don't feel like the military should go to spaces with kids under 16, if that makes sense. I feel like that's just a bit iffy to me. (Focus group 2, 30/06/25)

In our research project, most of the young people (aged 16-17) distinguished between the problematic nature of younger children's (defined by Alice as children under-16) engagements with everyday spaces of militarism, and their own. This was most likely influenced by predominant Apollonian constructions of childhood innocence and a societal imperative to protect young children (Holloway and Valentine, 2000), as well as the fact that 16 year olds are able to join the British military (Basham, 2016b). The ways young children were handed weapons, other military objects, and encouraged to dress in military uniform created 'exciting' encounters that, for most of the young people in our project, elided the realities of military conflict, as well as the ethical and psychological complexities bound up with warfare. The spatialities and practices of military recruitment at AFD events that typically take place in town and city centres were, therefore, troubling for these young people given their propensity to draw in families and young children (McGarry, 2022). While these critical perspectives predominated among the young people involved in our project, others countered these concerns with more positive responses claiming it was 'just a bit of fun', remembering back to moments in their childhood when they played with nerf guns or dressed in military uniform, seemingly without negative consequences. It underlines young people's diverse subjectivities in relation to examples of everyday militarism and hints at the ways certain actors (e.g. fancy dress toy soldiers, veterans) and practices (e.g. dressing up, play) that entangle war and play can evade straightforward critique (Carter and Woodyer, 2023; Rech and Yarwood, 2019; Woodyer and Carter, 2018).

‘Creating a community?’: Young people’s sense of inclusion/exclusion at AFD

Farah: We went there saying oh we’re just going to stand there watching armed forces marching around the whole town. Yes, we know there’s activities but can we participate, what can we do, who can we talk to? And then as soon as we got there, we were just like, it was a community, basically. And it was really touching to be honest, because everyone was talking to us.

Layla: I liked the sense of community it kind of brought in. I know when we went to the climbing wall – we were scared to do it, and Ruth was like oh shall we do it? And then this girl came up to us, like older I think, and was like do you guys want to do it? And we’re like, we’re too scared to do it. And she’s like, me too. It was talking to people, because it was creating a community, which was nice. But not a big fan of the recruitment side of it.

(Extracts from focus groups 2 and 1 respectively, 30/06/25)

A strikingly recurrent theme in the focus groups was young people’s surprise at the level of attention directed towards them at AFD and how, for some, this generated the sense of feeling part of a community. Farah remarks on this in the quote above and others recounted how the mayor, lord-lieutenant, veterans and other dignitaries made a special point of talking to them during the day. Referencing embodied and emotional remembrance practices (McSorley, 2014) associated with the Royal British Legion’s Poppy Appeal, Basham (2016a) illustrates how people are invited into ‘communities of feeling’ that encourage them to remember (and forget) war and colonial violence in particular ways. Young people’s accounts of their experiences of AFD similarly referred to moments where they were specifically sought out and invited into these militarised and solidaristic communities of feeling (Millar, 2022). Constructed as vital to security futures (Hörschelmann, 2016; Rech and Yarwood, 2019), young people play a pivotal role in events like AFD that are organised with the expressed intention to inform, inspire and recruit future military personnel (Ministry of Defence 2025a).

Indeed, the young people who participated in our project talked of their surprise at the relative dearth of people their age attending AFD, observing the prevalence of young children with families and older people, and this may explain the additional attention they received from organisers and others associated with the event.

McGarry (2022, 274), in his study of AFD in Liverpool, draws attention to the temporarily created 'liminal military landscape' that 'locates those engaging within it, either knowingly or unknowingly, in ambiguous space between that considered "civilian" and "military"'. In the second quote, Layla refers to feeling a sense of community generated through their encounters with other people at a climbing wall operated by a 'non-military' civilian adventure company that appeared to have less explicit connections to the armed forces. Notwithstanding their civilian appearance, Rech (2020) has shown how such activities can encourage embodied performances of physical endurance and fearlessness necessary for members of the armed services. Similarly, Hörschelmann (2016) has highlighted the range of outdoor event activities aimed at children and young people that increasingly blur distinctions between war play and non-militaristic activities. Although these kinds of liminal activities served to attract the young people, they were nonetheless sensitive to the sometimes subtle entanglements of civilian/military spaces and activities, most especially when the recruitment logics underpinning their presence were exposed, as Layla makes clear. The young people were, ultimately, conscious of how seemingly mundane encounters with practices, objects, and other people at AFD connected with broader geopolitical questions regarding the UK's security and the push to increase military recruitment, as this exchange illustrates:

Anna: Did anyone else see any kids dressed up or...?

Mira: Yeah.

Anna: You did?

Ruth: I think they kind of did it to help encourage young children to want to serve in the military or the armed forces in general when they're older. I think that's the main thing they were aiming for.

Mira: Also take maybe some misconceptions...

Anna: What sort of misconceptions?

Mira Do you want me to be really frank?

Anna: Yeah.

Mira: A lot of the people who go to the field just like don't come back. Quite literally. They die.

Teacher: Yes, casualties.

Mira: So, maybe take the fear out of it.

Anna: Why might they do that?

Mira: Just to encourage more people to get into the military field. Obviously it's an ever-growing field. Like, there's not going to be a time when we won't need it. We're always going to need different... so... always having people coming into it in different roles, is always good. So obviously they try and normalise it, so people don't think the military is like this way big thing that's so separate to you – it's just kind of like, oh, anyone can really be in the military. It's kind of everywhere and it's an important part of being in the UK.

(Focus group 1, 30/06/25)

In this extract, Mira identifies the importance of AFD as an event linked to what she defines as 'an ever-growing [military] field' and the requirement to encourage more people to join the military. The young people, more generally, talked about how they were made aware of opportunities (both at AFD and in their daily lives) to join the diverse armed forces Cadet and Reserve units, with the latter framed as 'more appealing' by some due to it being part-time and a less daunting route into a military career. Without an overt reference to the SDR 2025, the final quote from the extract above echoes the UK Government's push for a 'whole-of-society' approach to normalise and incorporate the armed forces into the broader national community. The embodied and emotional encounters afforded to young people at AFD referenced above and elsewhere in our article were, then, identified as integral and important ways to bridge the separation between civilian and military spheres (McSorley, 2014). They

were further evidence of the armed force's omnipresence in everyday life in the UK which for some young people was fairly unremarkable and unproblematic, whereas for others the nature of this presence served to further obscure the realities of state violence associated with the military.

While some of the young people talked about being drawn into militarised communities of feeling through their engagements with people and practices at AFD, others felt more uneasy about the predominant military representations and narratives in evidence. George, commenting on a photo of a table with military paraphernalia strewn across it, said the following:

Anna: Do you want to say why you took this photo?

George: What I was seeing was an undertone of like hypermasculinity a little bit, because a lot of how the men are represented in that sort of like big husky guys, like doing army stuff. And then the only woman on there is being a mum in the corner. [...] I think they've got the men in there because that'll appeal to sort of a lot of boys my age, probably, to sort of... especially sort of like the troubles with masculinity and stuff. And I'm not too sure why the mum is on there.

(Focus group 1, 30/06/25)

In the above extract, George reflects on his decision to take a photo of military ephemera carefully presented on the table of a charity supporting veterans. The image included wristbands, a beret, and a range of leaflets with photos of male service personnel, some featuring elderly veterans bedecked with medals, a young man with prosthetic limbs, and several larger photos of well-toned and bulky young men. The only woman in the photo is shown with what appear to be her children, subscribing to traditional gendered tropes regarding military service (i.e. the heroic injured or athletic male warrior vs. the female partner/mother nurturing and supporting the family. See Caddick, 2018; Cree and Caddick, 2019; Enloe, 1989; Rech, 2016). As Rech (2020, 1093) points out, 'military recruitment is a practice which...discriminates along lines of gender, sexuality, race, and...reproduces

assumptions about masculinity, femininity and the family'. For George, these reproductions were particularly troubling as they evoked a form of hypermasculinity that, he felt, pressured young men to perform their masculinity in specific ways that, it was assumed, would make their family and the nation proud. The quote problematises simplistic assumptions equating military service and notions of familial/national pride, connects it to broader societal debates about performances of toxic masculinity, and was indicative of how some young people felt alienated by the predominant representations on display.

While some young people thoughtfully reflected on the influence of the representations they engaged at AFD, others referred to their direct experiences of being made to feel marginal or excluded during the course of the day:

Alice: I found it interesting how it was primarily young boys getting involved in like wearing the uniforms and stuff like that. I found that very interesting. And me and another girl, we did go to the RAF stand, because I know she's interested in joining the RAF. I noticed how they spoke to us was rather different to how they acknowledged and spoke to the boys. Because when we stood... I had to stand there for like 10 seconds before they acknowledged us, and I was the one who had to initiate talking to them. And then when a guy walked past with his family, they immediately started talking to him, with no hesitation and without them having to initiate that conversation.

(Focus group 2, 30/06/25)

Young people were particularly cognisant of the diverse reactions they received from people involved in running the range of activities constitutive of AFD. Their sensitivity to how this was influenced by gender, as in the case above, point to the potential for further work to be conducted with/alongside young people that extend the contributions of this small-scale study. Such work might, for instance, tell us more about how banal militarism works to simultaneously include and exclude young people in militarised communities of feeling both at the event and beyond (Burridge and McSorley, 2013; Rech, 2020). This would place young

people's intersectional experiences of and engagements with events like AFD under scrutiny, in ways that can be overlooked by scholars heavily reliant on auto-ethnographic approaches and analyses of such examples of everyday militarism. This could be extended to examine the lived experiences of young people with prior familial military connections. Within this study, a respondent described how her father worked for the Ministry of Defence in a medical capacity, and another related that she was in the air cadets. Although not the central focus of our article, such identities and familial relationships could be further teased out in future research examining young people's encounters with instances of everyday militarism.

Conclusion

The UK's AFD in 2025 was marked in the wake of announcements in the SDR (published at the start of June 2025) regarding significant increases to defence spending and government ambitions to expand recruitment into the armed services, particularly among Cadet Forces. The proximity of the SDR's publication – that sets out the UK's geopolitical and security challenges and priorities for the coming years – and AFD, acts as a potent reminder of how militarism circulates between different scales of geopolitics encompassing the everyday and the state (Beier and Tabak, 2020). The emphasis in the SDR on reconnecting the armed services with the nation through the so-called 'whole-of-society approach' underlines the integral part played by recently invented public engagement and community events like AFD (Danilova, 2015). These exemplars of everyday militarism are intimately linked to, and facilitate, (geo)political decisions made by the state about its foreign policy, as well as the nature and size of its armed forces. These are events that go towards informing society's understanding of the armed forces and what they do, as well as opportunities for the state and its armed forces to inspire and recruit the next generation of personnel. In line with the work of others who have subjected various iterations of AFD to critical scrutiny (Danilova, 2015; McGarry, 2022; Morgan-Owen et al., 2024; Rech and Yarwood, 2019), we contend that these manifestations of everyday militarism demand sustained scholarly attention precisely because these are the arenas where geopolitics is grounded and engaged.

The findings from our modest study suggest the vision outlined in the SDR of young people as potential soldiers-in-waiting demands greater scrutiny and critique with/alongside the young

subjects who will surely be the focal point of subsequent recruitment drives. It is, we argue, a critical moment to interrogate the diverse ways examples of everyday militarism are understood, encountered, felt, and in some cases resisted in people's daily lives. While existing analyses of AFD have done much to interrogate the event's overlapping spatialities and processes of militarisation, they have done so predominantly from the perspective of scholars of Critical Military Studies. It is, however, children, young people, and their families who are one of, if not *the* key target audience for government recruitment drives and their manifestation through events like AFD, that are often problematically framed as being 'family friendly' to obscure their military recruitment objectives. Our novel and experimental approach to examining AFD extends existing work by engaging young people as geopolitical actors with diverse subjectivities with regards to their relationships with geopolitics and the military (Beier, 2011; Benwell and Hopkins, 2016). Rather than simply adding young people to studies of AFD and stirring, our article's main contribution highlights the significant things we can learn about how such events work through the embodied, emotional, and experiential encounters with everyday militarism they make possible (McSorley, 2014).

Firstly, we underline how young people's engagements and relations with different human and non-human actors – toy soldiers, veterans, weapons, military equipment and so on – at AFD generated diverse emotions of fun, fascination, humour, respect and reverence. Alongside these were young people's reflections on more unsettling moments that unveiled the realities of state/military violence through the recruitment logics underpinning the event, or their witnessing of young children being encouraged to handle military equipment and attire with little adequate contextualisation. Our methodological approach revealed young people's diverse perspectives of the military informed in part by their experiences of AFD, but it also encouraged critical reflection that brought their voices into dialogue and occasionally contestation. Collectively engaging young people's multiple subjectivities regarding everyday militarism through research can play an important role in countering one-dimensional perspectives that might otherwise be derived from an event like AFD. Being able to identify the practices and encounters young respondents consider particularly contentious and/or troubling might point towards potential ways to push back and counter everyday militarism with/alongside young people.

Secondly, we show how AFD created certain 'communities of feeling' that produced distinctive emotional responses. While some of the young people positively revelled in the excitement of being meted out for special treatment drawing them into different ephemeral communities at AFD, others were more cognisant of the possible reasons underlying this 'charm offensive'. These young respondents considered their experiences at AFD alongside other examples of youth military recruitment they encountered in their daily lives (e.g. invitations to join Cadet Forces via school presentations), and connected these to the broader geopolitics of military recruitment in the UK. Others felt marginalised or excluded by aspects of the event, critiquing problematic reproductions of masculinity/femininity in representations they saw, or noticing the distinctive gendered reactions to young men and women attending AFD. Thus, rather than merely identifying young people as central to security and geopolitical futures our contribution interrogates how they feel about being positioned in this way, and in turn, how this influences their emotional and embodied encounters with everyday militarism at events like AFD. Our hope is that this serves as an entry-point for further work from scholars of Critical Military Studies that investigates AFD and related examples of everyday militarism from the perspectives of young people.

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