

Browned Off and Bloody-Minded: The British Soldier Goes to War 1939-1945

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Although it is now a full 70 years since the close of the Second World War, there is little sign of a decline in either academic or public interest in the history of the war. In fact, there seems to have emerged a growing interest in the experiences not of those who held commands or public office, but rather of those who served and fought as ordinary soldiers and sailors. This interest is particularly keen in the United Kingdom and the United States, two nations whose forces have been, and continue to be, deployed in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, and it is not surprising that in Britain and America there exists such interest in how and why soldiers fight, or fought. Those studies which have appeared in the last 15 years or so have not been hagiographical works, at least for the most part, but have examined the complicated experiences of those who went into battle and of the ways in which nation-states organized and trained the large numbers required for such a massive military effort. On the British side, these include studies by, among others, David French, Jonathan Fennell, Clive Emsley and (very recently) Yasmin Khan. For American troops, particularly those who passed through the UK before June, 1944, David Reynolds's account of the 'occupation of Britain' is unmatched.

In 2009, Alan Allport published an extensively-researched, and extremely well-received, monograph, *Demobbed: Coming Home After the Second World War* (1), in which he skillfully blended political and personal source materials to tell the often overlooked story of how the British soldier came back from the war. Allport laid out comprehensively not only the story of this massive reverse migration, but also the political, cultural and social dynamics that informed it. This meant everything from accounts of mutinous RAF aircrew in Asia to political concerns that demobilization would unleash a horde of barbarous ex-soldiers in the UK, and to the gendered ways in which British courts considered violence by soldiers against unfaithful spouses. Allport has now produced a much more wide-ranging synthesis. Having examined how the British soldier returned from the war, he has now focused on how they prepared to fight, and fought.

For Allport, the story of these soldiers' experiences provides greater insight into two larger issues in the history of contemporary Britain: the moment of transition in the mid-20th century when the UK shed its 'fading Victorian heritage' (p. xvi) and came blinking into the modern age; and the ways in which civilians become soldiers, with all that entails for both the conscripted and the conscriptors. In describing the latter

phenomenon, Allport, like others pursuing this theme, identifies his subjects as 'citizen-soldiers'; the everymen, and women, who joined the forces in an emergency, never having contemplated service before. Before delving into Allport's very impressive work, however, it might be worthwhile to discuss this appellation, that of 'citizen-soldier,' just briefly. As used by Allport and others, the term 'citizen-soldier' refers to those who were not in the regular forces, 'professional soldiers' perhaps, but this term raises a question. Were not, and are not, all soldiers (at least in the Anglo-American world) 'citizens', conscripted or professional or whatever their provenance in the military? Service in the forces was not the norm in inter-war Britain, nor is it a widely shared experience in the UK or the USA today. Perhaps that is why in the 1930s, as Allport notes, mainstream British society regarded soldiers as almost non-citizens, so 'loathsome' were their reputations (p. 20). Today the situation is reversed, as popular culture almost demands an unquestioning valorization or veneration of military service, with the soldier now seen as some sort of superlative citizen. This problem of taxonomy, of course, is not easily solved – 'civilian-soldier' or 'emergency soldier' don't quite fit either – but perhaps further discussion will move us closer to a replacement term.

Allport begins his overview of the soldier's wartime experience with a welcome review of the state of the inter-war Army and of popular and political perceptions of this service, one which offered neither the romance of the Navy, nor the freshness of the recently christened RAF. If any one word could encapsulate feeling about the Army, it was 'Somme'. By the 1930s the public imagination framed the army as an anachronistic force, one whose generals had led men to slaughter on the Western Front, and one whose usefulness in any future conflict seemed doubtful at best. Allport credits this view to popular fixation on T. E. Lawrence's exploits and to a rising conviction among politicians and soldiers alike that the future lay with the bomber, not the ranker. This argument may in fact underplay just how influential were the proponents of what the American poet Howard Nemerov (a pilot in wartime himself) called the 'war in the air.' Nevertheless, this chapter and the one following it, describing the inter-war army's rather dodgy recruiting practices, its role as a sort of imperial police force in places like Waziristan, and the continued domination of the officer corps by men of good breeding and 'limited prospects' (p. 31) emphasize the poor shape the service found itself in on the eve of war in 1939. (This was, in fact, an army that saw at least three attempts by soldiers in India in the 1930s to gain repatriation by shooting Indian bearers or workers.) In this telling, the story of Dunkirk resonates both as a triumph of ingenuity and as a sign that only a vastly remade army stood any chance against the Germans. It is a well-framed argument, though it might benefit from some expansion outside of Europe. The collapse of British and colonial forces in late 1941 and early 1942 in Hong Kong, Singapore and Burma did not provide any redeeming lessons or examples of pluck under fire, but was doubly humiliating as a military defeat inflicted by a non-European army. Allport does briefly describe the fall of Singapore, but not in this specific context or continuum of collapse, rather in his examination of how early efforts at creating a wartime army after 1940 foundered. It is worth noting that many of those troops who had come to India and parts further east in 1940 and 1941 had done so as replacements for regular units who rotated home, presumably as they were considered of higher value. Allport might clarify just who was left to fight the Japanese by 1942. Were there any elements of the pre-war army present at Singapore or elsewhere in Asia in early 1942? What about those who held command? The defeats in Asia may speak to both the failures of the pre-war army, and to the initial problems faced by the army in turning out worthwhile soldiers in 1941 and 1942.

As in the case of the Americans, the British military faced the challenge of turning civilians into warriors. The British Army had faced another obstacle, as it was far more dependent than the other service branches on conscripted, non-voluntary recruits. Allport notes that many of these draftees were in much better physical condition than their fathers had been in 1914. They were also more privileged consumers, used 'to greater privacy and material comfort' (p. 80). Less deferential than their forebears, more willing to air grievances and absolutely desirous of making their stint in the army as short as possible, they seemed a parade ground sergeant's nightmare. Resounding defeats in Asia and North Africa in the first half of 1942 left many old soldiers, and politicians, denouncing this new generation of soldiers as physical and moral cowards. In fact, the army, still mired in pre-war practices, was spending much of its recruits' energies on

spit-and-polish inspections and drill, while continuing to provide officers selected less for their physical or academic qualifications and more for who they knew or with whom they rode to hounds. Fortunately for Britain, help – in the name of General Sir R. F. Adam – was on the way.

There is no shortage of historical work on the generals of the Second World War. Eisenhower, Montgomery, Marshall and Slim, all have received extensive scrutiny. Only more recently has attention turned to Ronald Adam. Named Adjutant-General for the Army in 1941, Adam managed to engineer significant changes in how the service treated and trained its soldiers. He pushed for early identification of those draftees most likely to desert or go AWOL, as well as for greater attention to the distribution of men to suitable jobs or assignments. This included a substantial reconstruction of the system of officer selection. Adam pioneered the consistent survey of troops' morale (and in doing so, provided historians with an invaluable resource) and made 'army welfare' into a going concern. If he did not change the culture of the army overnight, he did, as Allport describes here, begin to adjust the army to the population from which it drew its members. His actions created an environment in which soldiers felt that they might be able to accommodate themselves to the demands of military life without necessarily losing their humanity or their sanity. Many of those drawn into the army after 1940 did indeed find ways of alleviating some of the boredom or inconvenience or generally maddening details of army life, and they did so without Adam's overt assistance, but he set a tone and sent a message that even indirectly helped the soldier reckon successfully with his plight.

In the chapters detailing the experiences of these soldiers in the field, Allport provides a more general assessment, offering certain conclusions about the significance of this part of their service. For many in the army this was their first trip outside of Britain: the war 'would expose a generation of Britons to a world that was not made up exclusively of pink faces' (p. 137). Those who served in Egypt or parts of Asia experienced the Empire first hand, turning it from an academic abstraction into an often alien reality. The troops tended not to feel much affection for those who lived as colonial subjects, though it must be said that many troops also had nothing but scorn for those who ruled and administered these colonies. Soldiers' reactions to the massive famine that struck northeastern India after 1942 included both heartfelt efforts to distribute even their own rations to starving Indians and hearty condemnations of those who had apparently allowed this catastrophe to happen. The war did not turn these soldiers into staunch ideological defenders of the Empire, though it also hardly left them enamored of places like Calcutta and Cairo. Allport alludes to the troops' experience as representatives of a white, colonial society, but he does not fully explore what these men took home from their brush with empire. Did the fact that so many saw some part of Britain's empire, and were repelled by what they witnessed, make it easier for the post-war UK to start the process of decolonization so soon after 1945? This book also makes the intriguing argument that so much overseas service, in such a wide variety of places, did not increase the British soldier's curiosity about the wider world, but rather confirmed his view that life was assuredly much better at home. This attitude, according to Allport, contributed to the 'cultural insularity' of Britain after the war, perhaps explaining even partly British mistrust of any proposal for European political and economic unity. Mrs. Thatcher, of course, spent the war in Lincolnshire.

One part of the British soldier's story that goes mostly unconsidered here is the role the war played in introducing ordinary Britons to the other half of the Anglo-American world. David Reynolds has covered the relationship between those who were in Britain to encounter the thousands of American GIs based there, but what of the ways in which troops from both countries interacted in the field? A recurring theme in surveys of British morale in India, for example, was the vast difference in the range and type of amenities that were offered to those in the two armies. Pay, living quarters, even the size of the monthly beer ration: in all of these the GI came out ahead. What impressions of the United States did these Britons carry into the post-war years?

Apart from these musings on the war's impact on how Britons saw the rest of the world, the chapters covering service in the various theaters are necessarily more anecdotal than analytic, though they demonstrate vividly how alien many of these soldiers found the places in which they fought. The desert was 'the blue', vast, searingly hot and desolate. The Burmese jungle was confounding, forbidding, full of insects

and wet, wet, wet. Italy had its history, but also its massive poverty and endemic corruption. From these accounts of soldier's visions of the worlds they encountered, Allport moves back to a more analytical approach, laying out what one might call the varieties of military experience. At least half or more of those who served never actually fired a shot or felt the terror of battle up close. The mechanized forces that ruled much of the actual combat demanded enormous logistical support, the so-called 'tail' that followed the 'teeth'. Unsurprisingly, those at the front lines felt significant disdain for those in support and failed to acknowledge their dependence on those in the Ordnance or Service Corps to keep them armed, clothed and fed. In his assessment of how the army portioned itself out, Allport makes an important point: there were significant examples of wastage. He singles out the specialized units like Orde Wingate's Chindits. Their incursions into Burma might have provided a brief fillip to the rest of the army and the public at home, but these missions siphoned off resources, and capable soldiers, rather than reserving them for much more strategically important tasks. The exploits of someone like Wingate might have warmed hearts, but they did not win wars.

The book concludes with two related assessments: what impact did this army have on the successful campaign against the Axis powers, and what effect did military service have on those who participated in it? Regarding the former, Allport disagrees with traditional critiques of the wartime army as hidebound and cumbersome, fortunate only in its allies and the difficulties faced by its enemies. The British Army, in his account, persevered in the face of significant institutional, cultural and political obstacles. It took in thousands of raw recruits, trained them in ways of fighting that had been neglected for a generation and fought well in multiple theaters simultaneously. Moreover, it did so while maintaining at least some sense of civility and without recourse to the sort of violent controls employed by the German, Japanese and Soviet armies.

The effect of Army service on how these men thought of their own place in Britain and the country's own course after 1945 is something that was much discussed even in the immediate aftermath of the war. Critics of Adam's provision of educational resources to the troops saw a creeping socialist agenda behind offices like the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, but it would be a stretch to assert that these efforts were responsible for soldiers' votes for Labour in 1945. Allport does see other aspects of military life, from the gulf that continued to separate officers and men to the rates of pay that always lagged behind those enjoyed by civilian workers, and to soldiers' resentment of politicians' handling of vital issues like repatriation and demobilization, as key to understanding how and why the ordinary soldiers voted as they did at the end of the war. He credits Duff Cooper's observation that voting allowed the soldier a rare opportunity to strike back at the bureaucracy and rules and small indignities that made up military life. It was less a wholehearted vote for Labour than a sort of protest vote against those whom the soldiers identified as their superiors for the previous five or six years. Given the rather cynical view of politics and politicians that many soldiers seemed to share, as well as the often outspoken resentment many in the forces expressed towards those better-paid and occasionally disruptive miners and munitions workers in the UK, the argument that the 1945 election, at least for soldiers, was not about ideological change or even class solidarity seems a sound one.

In discussing the political impact of military service, Allport alludes briefly to two other developments that might have deserved some further attention. Critics of the army education scheme may have seen Bolshevism lurking in every pamphlet, but a close reading of many of the materials prepared for this project shows not a concern to move men ideologically in one direction or another, but rather a concerted effort to hammer home to soldiers the importance of active citizenship and the duties incumbent on those lucky enough to enjoy democratic self-government. There remained some real doubts, it appears, about the impact of military experience on the attitudes of those in the ranks. As Allport noted so perceptively in his work on demobilization, many in the UK were gravely concerned that military service would only transform men into ungovernable and violent creatures. A similar concern seems to have animated some of the educational provision as well. The pre-war perception of the soldier as a less than ideal citizen may not have disappeared even in the age of mass conscription. Allport mentions this briefly (pp. 296-7), but it seems worth even more investigation.

Another potentially fruitful line of inquiry regarding soldiers' politics, and on with which Allport has great familiarity, is the impact of the demobilization process on how those stationed outside the UK especially voted. The handling of demobilization drew continued criticism from soldiers, and the process was identified very closely with not only a Conservative Prime Minister, but the Tory War Secretary, P. J. Grigg. Furthermore, the 1945 election took place before the Japanese surrender, a time when many in uniform were not only concerned about the pace of repatriation and demobilization, but also gripped by serious concern that they were headed to Asia, not back home. Reactions among these soldiers to the use of the atomic bombs in August 1945 are not recorded here, though surely they were legion.

In closing his work, Allport offers some contextualization of the British effort in the Second World War, demonstrating especially to American readers the different place the war holds in British public memory than in the American imagination. Commemoration of the dead tended to co-opt or follow upon those memorials and rituals that had emerged after the Great War. The war's dates were added to the Cenotaph and other memorials from the inter-war period. The proportion of those who served who had actually seen combat was much greater in the First World War than the Second and those who came home after the latter moved more seamlessly back to private life, or so it seemed. (The continued impact of the war in private was the subject of Richard Flanagan's evocative and moving *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, winner of the 2014 Booker Prize.⁽²⁾) Sentimentality and selective recollection of their war experiences inevitably increased as distance from these events did too. The sort of triumphalist rhetoric of a 'greatest generation' that emerged in the United States about 25 years ago has not been part of the British experience though. There is neither time nor space here to discuss this difference, but it is one of the many issues that this book raises indirectly, pointing the way towards even more valuable research projects.

That this book raises such questions and many more (What of the experiences of the POWs? The war bride phenomenon in places like occupied Germany or Italy?) is not a weakness, but rather an indication of the richness of this topic. Alan Allport has produced a cohesive and coherent overview of the British soldier's experience. Fluently written and liberally bolstered by the words of the soldiers themselves, this account should attract, and deserves to gain, both a specialist and a general readership. It should also remind historians that the resources available for the study of this war and its role in contemporary British life are vast and under-explored. This is a valuable work, one that brings its subjects to life, while also pointing us toward so much that remains to be done.

Notes

1. Alan Allport, *Demobbed: Coming Home After the Second World War* (Yale, 2009).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (London, 2014).[Back to \(2\)](#)

Alan Allport replies: I would like to thank Andrew Muldoon for his detailed and thoughtful review. All I would add is that I completely agree with him that the social history of the wartime armed forces remains a 'vast and under-explored topic', and I hope that other historians may be prompted to expand upon, complicate, and perhaps even challenge some of the arguments sketched in my book.

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