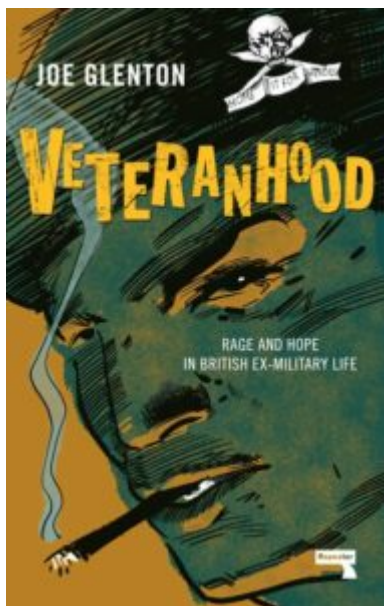
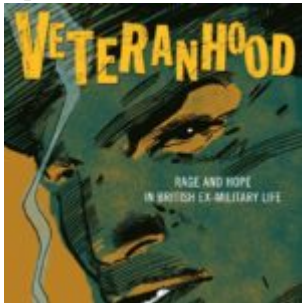


U.K. War Resister Reflects On Troubled State of “Veteranhood”

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Military service in the U.S. and the U.K. promised more than it ever delivered for many post-9/11 volunteers. As sociologist and Vietnam vet Jerry Lembcke observes, “This generation of veterans went off to Iraq and Afghanistan with more hoopla than any generation since World War II. But a lot of them, particularly the men, came back deflated and disappointed with the experience they had. It did not live up to the mythology of what war is supposed to be, because there is no glory in these inglorious wars.”

Adding insult to moral injury, hundreds of thousands of modern-day veterans developed long-term medical or mental health conditions that were service related. If these afflictions affected their job performance while still on active duty, the Department of Defense (DOD) thanked many of them for their service by drumming them out in punitive fashion. Depending on their discharge status, many became ineligible for free healthcare provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) or access to free higher education via GI Bill benefits. Under the rules of most old guard veterans’ organizations, they were not even welcome at their local post of the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Close readers of Joe Glenton’s new book, *Veteranhood: Hope and Rage in British Ex-Military Life* (Repeater Books) will be surprised to learn that any Brit who served for even a single day is considered a veteran. Medical care is, of course, less of a concern to former military personnel in a nation where a VA-style National Health Service covers everyone, plus higher education remains far more affordable than in the U.S. And even someone like Glenton—who went AWOL to avoid a second tour of duty in Afghanistan and then was court-martialed for it—later received a package in the mail

which welcomed him to the brotherhood and sisterhood of former squaddies. It included, he reports, “one of the small enamel veterans’ badges widely worn among the ex-forces community and a bundle of brochures about getting on in post-military life.”

This UK peculiarity aside, Glenton’s account of how post 9/11 veterans in his country are “getting on” in civilian life reveals many striking parallels with the readjustment problems of their counterparts in the U.S. Now a free-lance military affairs correspondent for the Guardian, the Independent, and other papers, Glenton first wrote about his experience in uniform and afterwards in *Soldier Box: Why I Won’t Return to the War on Terror* (Verso). In that 2013 book, he confessed that his own enlistment decision was made by “a chump ready made for the army, indifferent, apolitical, and working class.” In rural Yorkshire, “life was hard, we were poor, and this took its toll,” via teenage drinking, drug use, housing insecurity, and minimum wage work.

After Al Qaeda recruits toppled the twin towers in Manhattan, Tony Blair’s Labour government rallied to the side of the Bush Administration. For Glenton, and many other working-class lads on both sides of the Atlantic, this terrorist attack was “the call to arms of the age; *of my age*.” As his recruiting station officer promised, he “would be paid and there would be ‘three meals a day and a roof over your head’ and girls would queue to swoon over me and my soldier friends.” There would be other opportunities as well, including one stressed on a ‘leaving card’ from his co-workers, on his last day in a restaurant job: “Make sure you kill some ragheads!”

Invaders, Not Guests

During Glenton’s subsequent year-long deployment in Afghanistan, he never got a chance to do that personally, confined as he was to a “logistics park” at Kandahar Airport. As an ammunition store man in the Royal Logistics Corps, he doled out Hellfire missiles and other high explosives “at an astonishing rate,” to fellow soldiers who were not being welcomed as “peacekeepers” outside the wire. Even through Glenton had limited contact with Afghan nationals, the nature of the war began to sink in. “We were not guests, but invaders. We were not friends of the Afghan people, we were occupiers...Insurgencies of the scale we were seeing cannot happen without popular support. I did not have to be a general to recognize this.”

Three years into his military career and recently promoted to lance corporal, Glenton found himself back in England but resolutely opposed to doing another tour in Afghanistan. “I had joined the army half meaning to help people, to do something to improve the conditions of other people’s lives, not to occupy other people’s countries under the pretext of securing my own.” To avoid another combat deployment, he went into exile in Australia. Returning home after two years away, he faced charges of desertion which carried a prison sentence of ten years or more.

The rest of Glenton’s first book tells the story of how his court-martial backfired on the Ministry of Defense (MOD). While awaiting trial but initially not confined to the brig, he became a high-profile peace campaigner. He spoke at Stop The War Coalition meetings, did TV, radio, and newspaper interviews, and personally delivered a letter to then-PM Gordon Brown, at #10 Downing Street, which called for the withdrawal of all British troops from Afghanistan. As part of a deal with the prosecution, Glenton eventually pleaded guilty— to the lesser charge of going AWOL—and served four months of a nine-month sentence in a military prison.

On his first night there, “alone and locked in a single cell,” he nevertheless felt liberated. He had found his calling as “an anti-imperialist activist,” and, after his release, completed university studies that helped him become a journalist, film-maker, and award-winning author. In *Veteranhood*, Glenton returns to the subject of how ending up in the “soldier box,” as he calls it, can have a lasting personal and political impact. In the UK, as in the US, military training “discourages critical

thought” and “promotes antagonism” between those who serve and the vast majority of civilians who don’t. Even the author finds himself straddling the resulting “civilian-soldier” divide. After a decade of involvement in left-wing politics, including general election campaigning for Jeremy Corbin, Glenton still finds “dealing with *civvies* a trial. In moments of regression, they appear to me as ponderously slow, indecisive, dithering, governed by unmanly levels of self-doubt.”

Such estrangement didn’t exist, to the same degree, during the heyday of 21st century “citizen armies,” which included many volunteers and draftees with higher levels of class consciousness. As Glenton notes, “the modern British military has little in common with the military of WWII. Structurally, technologically, ideologically, and morally, these are two different organizations. One was a vast conscript army built...to fight fascism. The other is a small, rather backwards, and culturally separatist professional force.” Veterans of World War II “were far more likely to come from communities with a powerful sense of their role in the economy, with traditions and experiences of class solidarity and trade unionism.”

Some even participated in the so-called “Cairo Parliaments,” a series of quickly shut-down gatherings of active duty British troops stationed in Egypt. There, under left influence, they debated and voted on proposals for post-war reforms like nationalizing banks and mines, increasing pensions and access to higher education, and building four million affordable homes. In contrast, modern day vets exist in a world, shaped by Thatcherism and individualism, “in which traditional working-class organizations and communities have been diminished and replaced with a kind of warrior-ideal-meets-neoliberalism” As a result, too many ex-soldiers “cling to the only strong identity they have—that of the veteran.” And, as Glenton documents, that’s “an identity concocted by the very institutions that have wronged them”

Blazers or Something Better?

The resulting form of “identity politics” manifests itself, in often negative but some positive ways, across the spectrum. In his own book-writing quest to find “a better way of being a veteran,” Glenton bristles at the facile assumption that his former comrades constitute a solid “right-wing bloc whose politics do not extend much beyond braying racism and lagged-up squadristo.” Instead, his journalistic portrait of the more than 2 million UK citizens who served in the military reveals them to be “a divided, fractious, and politically divergent group.”

The author does acknowledge that “far right gatherings always seem to include military veterans—bitter men, wraiths in berets,” like those who joined the militant defense of Whitehall statuary about to be targeted by Black Lives Matter protestors. Seven months later, ex-military personnel were disproportionately involved in storming the U.S. Capitol to prevent Donald Trump from being toppled. As Glenton observes, that event—which featured former soldiers stacking up in tight formation to breach the building—became “an upscaled and vastly more lethal American version of our July 2020 anti-BLM riot.”

Glenton devotes a whole chapter to critiquing what he calls Blazerism”— mainstream vet culture, with its hosts of “sartorial signifiers—berets, medals, regimental ties, and blazers.” While Blazers may be vocally anti-socialist and anti-liberal in their social media barrages and voting patterns, they are, as Glenton reveals, quite collectivist within their own “ex-forces community.” For example, many are devoted to British Legion-backed charitable work, while always ready “to play homeless ex-serviceman off against migrants and civilian rough sleepers,” who are not among the deserving poor. The century-old Legion soldiers on “as a monolithic, highly political corporate charity and ultimate custodian of Remembrance.” At the other end of the spectrum, Glenton lauds the public education and organizing activity of Veterans for Peace UK. With far fewer foot soldiers, VFP-UK tries to counter “the revanchist nostalgia of Blazerism” by fostering a veteran identity based on

broad left values. According to the author, members of the group also tap into what one ex-military nurse calls the “positive experience of their service—the camaraderie, being part of team, and having a sense of purpose.”

Playing The Veteran Card

Glenton is a fierce and hilarious critic of special operators who’ve turned themselves into celebrity vets. Special Forces veteran Ant Middleton is among those, on both sides of the Atlantic, who have “monetized” their military service by peddling books, apparel, or other products under a newly acquired personal brand. Thanks to his second career as a television personality, best-selling author, and “positivity guru,” Middleton raked in four million British pounds in 2021 alone, according to the *Sun* (which employed him as its “Ask Ant” columnist). As Glenton asks: “Are the people who lost the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan really the people to dish out life advice? Can they supercharge your Bitcoin scam? Can former Navy SEAL Hank McMassive’s ten-point warrior code get you through a long shift at a Nottingham call center? Should you buy their new brand of Predator Drone Coffee.”

The author’s answer is a resounding “No” but that hasn’t stopped major parties in Britain and the US from marketing more veterans themselves as a new breed of politician, somehow better than the rest. The distinct brand of these “service candidates” is their unassailable patriotism and demonstrated past devotion to a cause greater than themselves. Nevertheless, as Glenton reports, “the ex-military people who have found their way into Parliament are mostly conservative former officers,” like Captain Johnny Mercer, Tory Minister for Veterans (until his April 2021 sacking) and “the sullen personification of a failed officer corps.”

Mercer’s counterparts in Labour can be found in its Friends of the Armed Forces. Resurrected in 2020 by Sir Keir Starmer, this group provides little counter-weight to “reactionary ex-servicemen’s dominance in public life” because it’s essentially “a stage prop for the Labour Right.” And, as we document in a forthcoming book, the same is true of the corporate Democrats who play the veteran card in US politics. As members of Congress, they rubber-stamp ever bigger Pentagon budgets, and even betray other veterans by trying to privatize the NHS-style health care system that serves nine million former enlisted personnel.

Not surprisingly, Glenton faults New Labour for initially importing the “American model of soldier-worship.” When the author joined the army in 2004, “soldiers were not popular and veterans were barely mentioned in the press.” In the period since then, the British state, its generals, MPs, the media, and military charities have engaged in what Glenton calls “a conscious campaign to re-popularize the military.” This “militarisation offensive” was necessary because millions of UK citizens were not big fans of the disastrous foreign interventions backed by Tony Blair. Labour’s response to that domestic opinion problem was outlined in a 2018 “Report of Inquiry into National Recognition of Our Armed Forces,” which included a foreword by then PM Gordon Brown himself. According to Glenton, the report became “an instruction manual for militarists looking to secure public support for war or reduce, to a tolerable level, active public opposition to military occupations” of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The fruits of this long-term project—embraced even more wholeheartedly by the Tories—are often on display. They included mandatory professions of support for the troops by “any parliamentarian broaching a defence topic; the *Sun*’s cretinous annual military awards and Turbo-Remembrancing; the careful positioning of uniformed service personnel at sports matches; and ardent poppy nationalism.”

Arrayed against this mainstream celebration of “veteranhood” (and the universal “heroism” in uniform that always precedes it) is the small cohort of “critical veterans” championed by the author.

Those interviewed by Glenton and profiled in his book remain engaged in various forms of left activism—BLM, the climate movement, renter’s unions and trade unions, the Northern Independence Party, Irish and anti-monarchical Republicanism, anti-fascism, and advocacy for Scottish independence. If nothing else, he concludes, they are helping to inform the left’s own “outsider perspectives on war, the military, and veterans” by dispelling harmful but popular myths about all three.