

# Orders is Orders... Aren't They?

## Rule Bending and Rule Breaking in the British Army

### Abstract

In common with all professional armies, the British Army is a disciplined force. There is a sharply stratified rank structure and formal rules abound. There is a *prima facie* case therefore that when formal rules are broken or bent the individuals involved are taking part in acts of 'resistance' or 'misbehaviour' or 'dissent', implying a binary opposition of interests between junior and senior. However, in this article I seek to provide a more nuanced approach to identify a range of rule bending and rule breaking processes embedded in the organizational culture at unit level, through a small number of case studies. To assist in the process Goffman's model of 'underlife' is adopted and extended for the British Army case, but only as a framework to assist in locating the observed events in the rich cultural milieu in which they take place. Viewed in this way, rule bending/breaking activity can be seen as complex and intricate events involving both those who break or bend the formal rules and the agents of authority in a continuing social process, part of the weft and warp of everyday life at regimental duty.

**Keywords:** British Army, resistance, misbehaviour, dissent, secondary adjustments, organizational culture.

### Introduction

"We had a sergeant who ... was of the 'old school' [*over strict*]. ... When he was a Gun Number One<sup>1</sup>[*he*] was absolutely detested. On one particular [*winter*] exercise in Otterburn [*military training area in the north of England*] a couple of thousand pounds worth of kit disappeared off the back of the truck: he had signed for it [*and would therefore get into trouble if it was not recovered*]. He spent three days looking for it. He found it three days later after the snow melted." (Warrant officer<sup>2</sup>, recalling his time as a private soldier.)

"One night the sergeant [*whom everyone disliked*] was asleep in his sleeping bag and was woken up as normal for his radio stag [*period of duty listening to*

*the radio*]. However, he found that he was stuck – the bag had twisted round and he could not get out. [*He called for help but*] nobody helped him, and he remained stuck. I just put my walkman on and went to sleep.” (Private soldier, recalling a recent event.)

An officer interviewee recalled that he had a friend in a cavalry regiment which regularly paraded with horses. One of the squadron commanders [*with the rank of major*] was deeply disliked by the soldiers<sup>3</sup> in his squadron for putting excessive emphasis on what he saw as ‘proper high standards’ but which they saw as unnecessarily messing them about. The soldiers responsible for feeding his horse started to spike the feed with oats, which made the horse friskier. In that regiment it was a shameful thing not to be in complete control of your horse and he now found his almost impossible to handle, thus having his personal standards publicly compromised. (Major, recalling recent conversation with a colleague.)

These three cases where revenge is meted out to superiors by their juniors are representative of a particular issue noted during an extensive insider ethnographic study of the British Army based in the discipline of Social Anthropology. This issue was the way in which soldiers handled the web of formal rules in which their lives were embedded, obeying some, bending or breaking others.

In common with all professional armies and many other organizations, the British Army is a disciplined force. Formal rules abound. At the highest level, during the period of the research for this article, these rules are embodied in law, in the form of the Army Act 1955, an Act of Parliament officially given to the Army in the

*Manual of Military Law* along with associated domestic and international law (or references to that law), with guidance to avoid ambiguities (MOD, 1972)<sup>4</sup>. Below that level come global official documents such as Ministry of Defence level instructions, and at lower levels there are various Standing Orders, Standing Instructions, and Standing Operating Procedures which have the status of lawful orders and which prescribe what is to be done and set limits to the behaviour of soldiers of all ranks. At the most immediate level are the periodically published formation and unit ‘routine orders’ (monthly, weekly, daily) which also have the force of a lawful order, but only apply in specified localised contexts, and may be short term.

To add to these paper-based rules, it is incumbent on each Service person to obey lawful orders given to them in any form by a superior officer. An order can only be unlawful if it violates a previously published order or established national and international legal codes, so the giving and taking of orders is a regular and constant feature of life in the Army. This is controlled somewhat by the existence of ‘chains of command’ which define for each soldier their own set of particular seniors and juniors. Thus in most circumstances only those organizationally positioned to do so actually give orders to particular soldiers or make rules for them to obey. This formal apparatus of orders of all kinds is played out through the rank structure which places each individual at a particular level in the military organization (Hockey, 1986: 3; von Zugbach, 1988: 15).

These rules, concretely articulated via official documents, legal codes, and formally required behaviour, are distinct from the informal rules or barely articulated but prescriptive cultural norms that are the subject of, for example, Jack Sidnell’s

paper on 'rule following' (2003) though, as we shall see, official rules do not exist in isolation from cultural norms and process.

So then, what of the three incidents of junior-on-senior revenge above? All involve action that seems to challenge or compromise the authority of formally sanctioned commanders thus breaking the rules of military discipline. These incidents could well have resulted in a formal disciplinary charge against those involved, under Section 69 of the Army Act 1955 (MOD, 1972) ('Conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline') although in the event none did. Were these challenges to the rules exotic one-offs that fell outside cultural norms or were they in some way consistent with the organizational culture? What was going on?

An obvious explanation of these events might be that they were acts of 'resistance' or 'misbehaviour' or 'dissent'. The topic of rule-violation in organizations has been addressed in several disciplines, as Collinson and Ackroyd have shown in their admirable overview (Collinson and Ackroyd, 2005). They show that, although organizational misbehaviour was recognized from the first, little systematic attention was paid to it before 1950. Since that date they distinguish 'four distinct perspectives; managerialist organizational behavior, labor process, post-structuralism, and feminism' (2005: 307). In their conclusion, however, they point out that the various social science approaches are by no means unified, use an array of different terms, and 'draw on a diversity of paradigms' (2005: 320).

Nevertheless there is a common thread that runs through much of the literature on resistance, misbehaviour and dissent in that they are portrayed as taking place in contexts of asymmetry of power. In essence, they are what Scott calls 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985) in his consideration of actions taken by impoverished manual labourers against land owners newly made rich by a government irrigation project.

This common thread presupposes a binary opposition between subordinates (institutionally or economically weak) and superiors (powerful, with control over the conditions in which the weak find themselves), the one subject to domination by the other. It is to be found, for instance, as a strong running theme in Jermier, Knights and Nord's (1994) collection of essays on resistance and power in organizations, Gouldner's critique of Weber's model of bureaucracy based on an ethnography of a gypsum plant near the Great Lakes in the USA (1954), and Goffman's analysis of patient and staff behaviour and attitudes to rules in a mental institution (1968). Indeed, it is in the spirit of late twentieth century and early twenty-first century social science to seek out and expose oppression and dominance in many different forms (Ortner, 1995) and resistance has been identified and expounded upon in any field where political or social oppression may be found, including organizations certainly, but going far wider. Areas that have attracted scholarly attention have included, for example, the oppression of ethnic and political minorities, class and economic oppression, and gender oppression (see, for a brief sample across time and subject matter, Comaroff, 1985; Ong, 1987; Diamond and Quinby, 1988; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Fiske and Ginn, 2000; Korovkin, 2000; Ezzamel *et al.* 2001; Marschall, 2002; Ewick and Silbey, 2003).

There are traces in some areas of the literature, however, where a putative binary opposition between the powerless and the powerful has received a more nuanced approach. For example, Webb and Palmer's (1998) analysis of the behaviour of workers and supervisors in a Japanese manufacturing 'transplant' in the UK (a factory with British staff using – at least officially – Japanese work practices) shows different acts of rule-bending/breaking at different levels of the organization and in different circumstances. Sometimes irregular practices were hidden from supervisors;

sometimes supervisors condoned or encouraged them. The authors also reason that at times the management must deliberately have allowed (or at least did not stop) deviation from the clearly stated company rules. Similarly, Collinson's article on safety and safety practices on North Sea oil installations (1999), shows how directly employed workers, contract workers and supervisors (all of whom had different employment statuses) sometimes cooperated and sometimes acted independently in rule bending/breaking to maintain an acceptable formal safety record.

Rule bending/breaking has, furthermore, been viewed as more than disobedience *per se* but rather as activity with a wider purpose, a multifaceted set of actions that are part of the unofficial dimension to organizational life. For example, some acts of disobedience have been seen as strategic ways of limiting the success of management profit-making activity or as direct action against particular management policy, either of which can form an element in negotiating a concession or an indulgent reaction from management, as part of the 'effort bargain' (Flynn, 1916; Gouldner, 1954; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999, for example). Others can be seen as *rites de passage* providing a social vector by which newcomers might be put through particular experiences on the road to becoming full members of the working group (Collinson, 1988), whilst still others might be interpreted as means whereby experienced skilled workers attempt to maintain their prestige and informal power in the eyes of both management and less skilled workers (see, for instance, Thompson and Bannon, 1985).

This article attempts to bring such a socially-based nuanced perspective to rule bending/breaking behaviour in units of the British Army. In doing so, it adds to a very thin body of academic literature on the organizational culture of that institution. John Hockey's *Squaddies: Portrait of a Subculture* (1986) was the first attempt to

describe British soldiers' culture, comprising an ethnographic account of infantry soldiers in recruit training, then in a formed unit in barracks after training, and finally on operations in Northern Ireland. It remains one of only a very small number. Since *Squaddies* there have been only six studies that are in any way comparable. These comprise the first part of a wider analysis by Reginald von Zugbach of the position of officers from different regiments in the British Army hierarchy (1988), an attempt to capture British Army culture as it pertained during the Falklands War by Norah Stewart (Stewart, 1991), Paul Killworth's PhD thesis on culture and power in the British Army at infantry platoon level (1997), my work on 'social structures' at unit level (see for example, Kirke, 2000; 2006; 2009a and 2009b) and Thomas Thornborrow's on identity issues in the Parachute Regiment (Thornborrow, 2005). To this short list we should add Anthony King's article (2006) on bonding in the British infantry which, although narrowly focused on military operational practice, adds something to our understanding of military culture. Of these, Hockey's work is the most directly relevant to the subject of this article. His principal theoretical contribution is the characterization of what he calls the 'negotiated order' in the Army, drawing on earlier work by Strauss *et al* (1974). He notes that private soldiers have the capacity to make officers and NCOs look less competent by carrying out what he calls 'unofficial' activity. In response, officers and NCOs protect themselves by avoiding making life unnecessarily difficult for the privates. 'Negotiated order' as Hockey sees it thus exists in the space between the formal power of the officers and NCOs and the potential for the private soldiers to make life difficult for them, which would include acts of revenge as in the cases above. In short, this is resistance with a purpose – to change the application of power by the powerful. Hockey's main contribution in this area is therefore to show how apparently powerless individuals

and groups at the bottom of the British military hierarchy can act effectively against those with institutional power to curb their use of that power. The case of the major's horse, for example, could be seen as a reaction by his soldiers to their officer's behaviour towards them: in making him appear to have low standards of competence himself they were undermining his main thrust for 'proper high standards' and thus raising the stakes in the negotiation.

An outsider may be forgiven for concluding that an individual soldier's life is so hedged about with formal rules that he or she has little choice about how to behave and what to do next. For example, various orders and instructions will specify what time to get up, what to wear, where and when to eat, whom to obey, whom to salute, how to salute, what to do whilst on duty and the limits of behaviour off duty. Failing to obey such orders can be expected to lead to disciplinary action which might result a period of limited freedom, a fine, or confinement in the unit guardroom. To reinforce this view the rank and command structure is one of the most visible elements of British Army culture, representing the apparently all-pervading elements of discipline and authority.

The system of formal rules, however, is only one element in the wider social system in a British military unit. Other elements comprise a rich informal culture ('unofficial' in Hockey's terms) far removed from the shouting foot-stamping order-giving image in the popular imagination, a deep concern with professional soldierly behaviour (expressed in many forms from simple tasks like lighting a fire in the rain to highly complex activities such as operating an armoured fighting vehicle in a close battle), and a practical and emotional engagement with the military group, its identity and its reputation. This cultural melange of formal, informal, professional and identity systems is played out in a continuously shifting transition between these elements and



through a set of networks of personal relationships which provide media for interaction that transcend the apparent strictures of the rank and discipline system (described in detail in Kirke, 2006 and 2009b). To understand rule bending and rule breaking in this wider social system, therefore, we need to look closely at further examples and the social and organizational interactions that flow around them.

This article is based on my research in the British Army. It was an unusual study in that data were collected over an extended time (thirty years) from an insider position as a full member of the organization (as a commissioned officer in the Royal Artillery). The methodology of the study involved participant observation (living the culture) accompanied by the creation of fieldnotes (in the form of a private journal) and the assemblage of personal memories in retrospect, all of which included observations and analysis of interactions, informal relationships, material culture and summaries of the incidents that occurred in the normal processes of daily life. What started as a self-motivated personal study became formalized in a year's research at the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge in 1993/4 and subsequent work towards a PhD, both of which included extended conversations and in-depth semi-structured interviews and visits to a wide range of units. Data were organized and analyzed using a qualitative data package, NUD\*IST 6,<sup>5</sup> to discover patterns in the data, regularities and recurring themes that led to conclusions about aspects of the Army's organizational culture. Because of my status as an insider researcher the process involved a great deal of reflexive thought. This thought revolved mainly around the effect of my presence as both a researcher and a participant with an authority status, the advantages I had in being able to identify nuances that might have eluded a naïve researcher, and the disadvantages that came with diminished objectivity – a lack of 'stranger value' (Beattie, 1966: 87). These considerations had

something in common with the issues identified by Higate and Cameron (2006), when they comment on the attempt in their research ‘to complement the dominant scientific approach through reflecting on our involvement in a qualitative research project’. In short, I had to pursue a very personal trajectory in tuning the minutiae of the research activity to attempt to mix deep immersion in the field with at least a degree of social scientific detachment.

In the absence of any formally articulated social anthropological code of ethics in 1974 at the start of this project, the driving ethical principle was to ‘do no harm’, combined with a commitment to keep private the identities of those concerned, and these have been retained as underlying self-imposed attitudes as various ethical codes have emerged.<sup>6</sup> Nobody was at any stage compelled to answer questions, all information was treated as in confidence, and informed consent was obtained whenever practicable. For these reasons all names in this article have been changed to pseudonyms to preserve anonymity, as has the contextual information surrounding many of the cases stated.

It should be emphasized that although I was a member of the British Army this article does not necessarily reflect official opinion or thought. It is an entirely independent view.

### **Navigating in a Sea of Rules**

On my first day as the Regimental Signals Officer in a Royal Artillery regiment, recently appointed and fresh out of university via a three-month long technical course on regimental signals, I was introduced by my troop sergeant-major (‘TSM’), WO 2 Daniel Wilson (a warrant officer of some fourteen years’ service) to my signals sergeant, Sgt Mick Parish, in his work-place, the battery<sup>7</sup> signals store. He

was known to be an able and effective sergeant and a good man to have in this position, which was both technically and organizationally demanding. My status as a junior officer who had only a small amount of regimental experience, all of it outside the field of regimental signals, was something akin to a management trainee.

Although I had a rank that exceeded the sergeant major's by three levels and Sergeant Parish's by two more, I was expected to defer to their experience and professional competence. I was frequently told that just because I had done a long course I was not yet a professional Royal Artillery signaller and that I still had a lot to learn. On the other hand, there was an expectation (articulated by my Battery Commander ('BC' – a major) and Commanding Officer ('CO' – a lieutenant colonel)) that I would provide leadership to my troop and some indefinable and somewhat ethereal attributes that were brought by officers rather than warrant officers or senior NCOs. In a barely articulated way it was up to me to listen to and respect my soldiers' expertise but nevertheless to take the important decisions and provide inspiration and set standards of both professional and personal behaviour. At the same time, I was expected to provide pastoral care to my men, supervised formally by my BC and informally by his battery sergeant major. In other words, I was in the typical position of a junior officer.

Having shaken Sgt Parish's hand, I glanced round the store. The room was about twenty feet square with polished bare floorboards and two large windows, but the first thing that struck me was the dense array of metal 'dexion' shelving all regularly spaced with each shelf devoted to a different type of communications equipment. Radios were all in one place, interface boxes in another, cabling was neatly sorted, stacked, tied and tagged. Aerials ('antennas' to the initiated) were stacked in sections, close by the square boxes known as 'tuams' into which they connected. There were packs of D10 black plastic-insulated twisted pair copper wire

(‘line’), and line-laying equipment. Everything was clean and in order and accompanied by an unmistakable and familiar background smell that seems to have been present in every military store I have ever been in, a universal piece of military alchemy somehow blending traces of floor polish, tarpaulins, military clothing and metal.

One area seemed strangely different from the rest. High on a shelf at the back of the store was a cardboard carton, from the top of which jutted evidence of jumble rather than the order that pertained elsewhere. I could see the corner of a tuam and a piece of cabling with a substantial plug on the end, and something that might have been a D10 cable pack. “What’s that, Sergeant Parish?” I asked. I could see him exchange a glance with the Sergeant Major, who spoke first. “It’s Sergeant Parish’s buckshees<sup>8</sup>, Sir. Don’t worry about it.” ‘Buckshee’ was the term we used for any surplus items that were not accounted for in the official ledgers or ‘books’.

Some days later, in the twilight of the end of the working day, I saw Sgt Parish and one of the junior NCOs in my troop carrying that cardboard box towards a landrover<sup>9</sup>. I asked them what they were doing. “The QM (Tech) is inspecting my store tomorrow, Sir”, Sgt Parish said cheerfully. “We can’t have him setting his eyes on my buckshees!”. I had previously seen the Commanding Officer’s routine order publishing the formal inspection of all stores by the two regimental quartermasters, (one of whom, the Technical Quartermaster) was known as ‘the QM (Tech)’). These officers, captains commissioned from the ranks, were responsible to the CO for all the equipment in the regiment. The order had specifically said that everything in all the stores was to be counted, and all surpluses and deficiencies were to be declared. Our Signals Troop surpluses comprised the very buckshees that were now being hidden away, and so here was Sergeant Parish openly disobeying this official order. I was his

troop commander, formally responsible not only for the troop and its equipment but for its standards of conduct and propriety, and nobody had discussed this breach of official instructions with me. What should I do? I had only a moment either to give Sgt Parish and his assistant a firm order to return the buckshees to the stores, or by not doing anything to let them continue to squirrel the kit away. I was an officer and so had a duty to uphold the rules and tell him to put the buckshees back, but Sgt Parish was not behaving as if he was breaking any rules. What was going on?

I let them get on with concealing the buckshees, but I needed to find out the rights and wrongs of the case so I went to see my TSM to discuss it with him and gain his advice. When he had heard my tale he laughed out loud and said, “You would have made a complete arse of yourself there, Sir, if you had stopped Sergeant Parish. You did the right thing to leave him alone.” “But the order said that surpluses had to be declared...”. “I know that, Sir, but the QM (Tech) knows perfectly well that all the buckshees in all the stores in the regiment are being hidden away right now. He was a sergeant in charge of a store himself once and he knows exactly what’s going on. And anyway, how could Sergeant Parish manage without his buckshees?”

It was thus that I discovered the regular hidden trading between stores holders in the regiment. If a piece of equipment became lost it was as often as not replaced by undeclared exchange of buckshees between the stores holder and a colleague in a different battery, as a ‘favour’. And one favour always begat another favour in due course in a continuing unofficial process that carried on ceaselessly within the regiment. Buckshees were garnered whenever possible, for example by getting ‘replacements’ for undamaged equipment by ‘writing it off’ at the end of large exercises, or by bidding for new issues to replace sound items that had supposedly been worn out, and occasionally by finding and keeping abandoned items on training

areas. All of this was done with the agreement of the authority figures in each battery as part of the weft and warp of normal life, even though it was against the formal rules.

However, official tolerance of the creation and maintenance of buckshees stopped at the highest level, in the form of the two quartermasters. Although they knew about the process, having, as my TSM had said, traded in buckshees themselves once, from their current point of view it was inefficient and caused waste for which they were ultimately responsible to the CO. When the unofficial management of stores became gross, they intervened, as I discovered later in my first year as Regimental Signals Officer. A land rover trailer belonging to my troop was lost in a fire with all its contents which had therefore to be written off. This was a golden opportunity for Sgt Parish to create a significant horde of buckshee stores by exaggerating the number of items lost and he threw himself into the task with élan. I and my BC (partaking in some of Sgt Parish's glee) endorsed this exaggerated bid, but it was returned by the QM (Tech) with a laconic note saying that all these things could not possibly be fitted into a single trailer – he had tried it. We pleaded a clerical error and submitted a more modest, and successful, bid with less exaggeration.

Whilst Hockey's model of negotiated order could be used to examine the cases of revenge at the top of this article, it may not be so useful in considering the case of Sgt Parish's buckshees. Whereas Sgt Parish might certainly have nursed a grudge against his naïve young officer if I had made him declare his buckshees and he could have made life awkward for me subsequently, this never arose. In contrast, the chain of command within the battery cooperated strongly with his attempts to preserve his bargaining power with his opposite numbers in other batteries by allowing him to hide the offending articles. Whilst the idea of negotiated order could be applied to the

corporate relationship between the battery and the Quartermaster's Department, it would not serve to illuminate what was going on within the battery.

Erving Goffman provides a more appropriate model than negotiated order in *Asylums*, his masterly work on life in what he calls 'total institutions' (1968). He defines such institutions as '... a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.' (1968: 11). His base case is a lunatic asylum, but he also cites examples of life in other enclosed places such as monasteries and military units. Whilst present day British military units are not as isolated as they were when Goffman wrote *Asylums*, they still manifest many of the defining characteristics of his concept of total institutions. Unlike many social groupings, military units have clearly defined physical and social boundaries, membership is unambiguous and the members both work and live together. As Kier says of the US military, it 'creates an encompassing environment, integrated around collective goals and relatively isolated from civilian life' (1999: 29). Within that environment, the round of life is enclosed and formally administered (at least during the working day), and barracks provide a place of residence for large numbers of like-minded individuals, all characteristics that Goffman attaches to a total institution. The resemblance to such an institution is more marked when units are deployed on training or operations because they move as discrete bodies from their home to an alien environment (where it is indeed isolated) while retaining their identity and structure.

Goffman devotes a complete essay to what he calls 'underlife', informal or unofficial activity within the institution (1968:157-280), in which he makes a distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' adjustments. Primary adjustments

consist in the co-operation of the individual in what the institution formally requires, whereas secondary adjustments belong to the informal world: they 'represent ways in which the individual stands apart from the role and the self that were taken for granted for him by the institution' (1968: 172). Goffman makes a further distinction between 'disruptive' secondary adjustments, which are aimed at rupturing the smooth running of the organization, and 'contained' secondary adjustments, which fit into existing institutional structures and make life easier without introducing pressures for radical change or challenging the existing system.

The incident with the buckshees exactly follows this pattern. Behaviour that was against the formal rules was taking place to make life easier for those involved, a classic contained secondary adjustment. Indeed, the individual actions that comprise the negotiations in negotiated order, including cases of revenge as described above, can also be viewed as secondary adjustments, 'contained' for the most part as they tend not to involve open defiance or disobedience. Goffman's model thus seems to provide a useful framework.

There remains, however, an issue that is not fully addressed simply by applying Goffman's model of 'adjustments'. The three cases of informal revenge can be distinguished from the case of Sgt Parish's buckshees because that case involved the informal endorsement and approval of agents of authority in the form of myself and, *post facto*, the TSM. Similarly, Sgt Parish's exaggeration of the contents of the trailer had the formal endorsement of both myself and the BC. Whilst all of these incidents involved a deliberate infringement of the rules, there appears to be a difference in quality between the first three and the latter two because of the endorsement by authority figures who had a duty to stop Sgt Parish but chose not to.



Why might authority figures endorse this activity, then? For some, of course, we may presume that they might not be prepared to put in the effort to cause a confrontation or risk its consequences – a factor that would add power to the private soldiers’ negotiating position described in Hockey’s *Squaddies* (1986). But other, organizational cultural-based, reasons could very well apply. For example, the powerful attitudes, expectations and assumptions connected to identity with, and loyalty to, the organizational segment in question would lead members of that segment to have a common interest in enhancing or preserving its reputation and effectiveness. Where the rule bending/breaking activity not only made life easier for those concerned, therefore, but also contributed to the military success or reputation of the relevant organizational segment, then tacit or open endorsement by authority figures might well follow. In this case, the authority figures in the battery were prepared to bend the truth about the contents of the burned trailer because it would provide more buckshees for Sgt Parish to trade with, and thus help to ensure that, as an organization, we would be well placed to have everything we needed for training plus extra bargaining power with the other batteries.

In order to add further value to the analysis of incidents of rule bending and rule breaking behaviour in the Army, therefore, we need to go beyond Goffman’s model. The expansion proposed here is the decomposition of ‘secondary adjustments’ into a further sub-category: those that are ‘OK’ in the perception of those carrying them out (‘legitimate secondary adjustments’) and those that are ‘not-OK’ (‘illegitimate secondary adjustments’). If we take the examples described so far, the three cases of revenge at the top of this article were obvious illegitimate secondary adjustments, and Sgt Parish’s use of buckshees and his attempt to generate more

through the exaggerated write-off claim following the fire were treated as legitimate secondary adjustments by his superiors in the battery.

In the process of every day Army life, whether an unofficial activity is endorsed as 'OK' or not lies in the hands of the agents of authority in the particular context. Thus, in an unofficial way, the command system manages what might be called 'OK-ness' in terms of rule breaking and bending. Knowledge of which activities are in which category is crucial to the subordinate agents in the military group as they define the limits of approved activity in daily life – the extent to which rules can be bent or broken without attracting official censure. This in turn means that formal rank and formal power impose an obligation on those with authority to signal the limits of 'OK-ness', however subtly or indirectly.

In the mid 1970s the Army was generally badly paid. For example, several of the married soldiers in my troop were drawing rent rebate from the Government because their pay did not meet the minimum officially defined level for their housing cost, yet they were housed by the Government in official married quarters. Several soldiers, married and single, fell into debt and it was one of my many pastoral tasks as a junior commander to help them manage their way out of their situation. It was not easy: we had little financial room for manoeuvre.

Nevertheless, for everyone there was potentially an unofficial bonus through the medium of travel claims. At that time, each soldier was allowed to make four return car journeys on leave at public expense each year and it was simplicity itself to gain extra cash by exaggerating the length of these journeys and claiming bogus motor mileage<sup>10</sup>. It became a fairly general secondary adjustment in a particular unit. The pay staff, who managed the day-to-day financial matters in the regiment, were tacitly compliant, thus letting it be understood that these exaggerated motor mileage

claims were 'OK' as long as they were plausible; in other words that they were legitimate secondary adjustments<sup>11</sup>.

Suddenly, however, there was a catastrophic change. The Royal Military Police investigated some highly optimistic claims and found them to be false. The discovery of such offences was followed up by an investigation of the validity of past travel claims and a small number of soldiers were prosecuted for fraud. Their careers were ended and they were discharged in disgrace. The extreme unfairness of this apparent scapegoating struck us all, but nobody wanted to talk about it. Business went on as usual but the habitual exaggeration of travel claims stopped.

This sudden shift from unofficial tolerance of what had become a recognized perquisite to ruthless official prosecution demonstrates that 'OK-ness' and 'not OK-ness' are not necessarily stable categories. Unofficially defined as they are by agents of formal authority, the permanent background presence of the formal apparatus of power and punishment allows those agents or their superiors to use that apparatus to change the definitions at any time.

A further complication arises concerning the appropriate authority figure to define the legitimacy or otherwise of any particular secondary adjustment. Sgt Parish, for example, was under the authority of my TSM, myself, and the BC. In theory, any of us could have given him different definitions of 'OK' when it came to the treatment of buckshees. In practice, we all spoke with the same voice so the issue did not arise. What bound us in this same voice was the organizational culture of the battery, which provided our resource for defining correct and incorrect practice. But what if we had had different perceptions of OK and not-OK?

Captain Giles Puttenham was an officer in an artillery battery during the later stages of the Cold War. This battery had a standing order that the steel helmet was to

be worn during all phases of tactical exercises, although the operationally relaxed Cold War ambience was such that the wearing of helmets was considered by many units as excessively 'war-y'<sup>12</sup>. However, there were some individuals who took their operational role very seriously and it was Capt Puttenham's fate to find himself serving under one of these. The helmet was an uncomfortable and heavy piece of equipment that put strain on the neck and Capt Puttenham hated it.

His role in the battery was as an 'OP Officer', leading a small party of soldiers (his 'OP party') that was routinely split off from the main body and deployed some distance away in an isolated spot. On one exercise he gave his soldiers permission to take off their helmets and wear berets instead, thus making it a legitimate secondary adjustment for his soldiers: although it was against the rules it was 'OK' because their authority figure had given them permission to break the particular rule. However, when the BC visited this small group he took Captain Puttenham aside and told him firmly to obey the standing order and get his, and his OP party's helmets on.

Puttenham apologized to his superior and did so. However, after the BC left, he told his soldiers to put off their helmets and resume their berets but now to keep a good look-out for the next visit of the BC. With early warning they could get their helmets back on again easily enough. From now on, as far as Puttenham was concerned this was an illegitimate secondary adjustment because he would get into trouble if he was found out, but as far as his men were concerned it was still legitimate as their immediate authority figure had given them permission to do it.

Incidents like these introduce a new layer of complexity in the understanding of rule observation in the Army. Although the authority agent is a key figure in any incident, the effective agent of authority can change with the context. For instance, had the QM(Tech) arrived at the moment when I was allowing Sgt Parish to load his

buckshees into the landrover then my authority would have been trumped by his and something that was passing by default as 'OK' would instantly have become 'not-OK'. Even the BC would have been unable to help Sgt Parish because the QM (Tech) would have been a formal agent of the CO's authority.

When I was undergoing the training course to equip me (at least technically) to be the Regimental Signals Officer I found myself alone as a commissioned officer among my fellow students who were all junior NCOs of the rank of bombardier (a Royal Artillery rank equivalent to corporal in the rest of the Army). They were on a 'regimental instructors' course which had an identical syllabus to the 'regimental signals officers course' so I and they were amalgamated into a single body of students. This meant that I was with individuals who had knowledge and experience in the field of signals which I completely lacked. One of the modules in the course concerned the planning and setting up of a local telephone network, involving the use of a portable telephone exchange and the laying of D10 telephone cable to separate 'subscribers'. What was called 'line laying' involved spooling out cable from a standard D10 drum while standing up at the back of a moving vehicle, and managing it with a wire guide on the end of a stick. Whenever the drum of D10 was used up, a new one had to be connected using copper joints and clamped with 'crimpers' (a specialist object something like a pair of pliers) which took a minute or so to do: the process was known as 'jointing'.

The last element in the 'Line Module' was an exercise on a Friday to allow us to practise what we had learned with the real equipment on a relatively wide scale on Salisbury Plain. In pairs, we had to lay a prodigious amount of cable in the morning (a remarkably quick process and highly enjoyable), connect it to a field telephone at about lunch time and take part in a brief communications exercise via the manual

exchange to test the network. At the end of the exercise we had to recover the cable (still in our pairs) by winding it back manually onto the empty drums, a much slower process than spooling it out. It was by now well into the afternoon, the weekend called, and I and my companion were going to be late. Worse still, the cable, which had started the day tightly coiled, now did not wind back easily and soon became tangled. This required us to cut the wire, untangle it, and then joint it again making the process agonizingly slow. Friday was often referred to as 'Poets Day' ('pack up early tomorrow's Saturday') and this delay began seriously to rankle as there would be no possibility of packing up early today. After a time my companion suggested that instead of jointing the cable we should simply tie the cut ends together. I said that we should not do that because it would render the cable useless – it would lose its electrical continuity. A discussion then ensued in which he told me that it was common practice to tie cable and that we were being foolish in jointing every break, and anyway it was Friday afternoon. I too was feeling the loss of the Friday evening and so, supposedly bowing to his greater experience, I agreed that from then on we would tie the cut ends rather than jointing them. Speed increased and we were able to get away in reasonably good time in the end, even if we had wrecked the cable. The other pairs had made similarly speedy progress, so it appeared that they had used similar methods, though nobody mentioned it.

In this case we can see an authority figure - myself, a commissioned officer - making a rule and issuing a lawful order – joint the cable – finding himself having his order questioned by a junior individual who suggests a secondary adjustment – tie the cable. He makes the case that he is suggesting a legitimate secondary adjustment because it is 'common practice'. The authority agent then changes his mind and accepts the suggestion.

This incident introduces a new factor. Whilst authority figures may be trumped by more senior agents in the hierarchy they may also be unsure of their ground and open to negotiation or persuasion. In this case we see that the categories of 'OK' and 'not-OK' are being negotiated, the junior individual appealing to his greater experience to lend weight to his negotiations. This, *inter alia*, highlights the cultural value given to experience: decisions may be the province of the senior person but the senior person is also obliged to listen to the voice of experience in making that decision. In sum, the room for manoeuvre for the individual does not therefore have to end with the declaration by authority agents of what is and is not 'OK': the junior can still have a voice with their senior.

Second Lieutenant Justin Saxby was an objectionable young man. He had joined his military organization after his officer cadet training at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst but there were some months to wait before the required specialist professional course. As is usual under such circumstances he was sent to an infantry battalion to learn about life at regimental duty<sup>13</sup>. He was given command of a platoon for the duration of his stay with the battalion and seemed set for an enjoyable few months. His platoon, as was normal, comprised three infantry sections of eight or nine men<sup>14</sup> commanded by corporals, and a platoon sergeant who saw it as his job to educate him in the ways of the Army and 'bring him on'. He refused to learn, however, from his platoon sergeant or to take his advice in any way, believing apparently that his training at Sandhurst had given him all he needed to know. He infuriated his soldiers by, as they saw it, messing them about with poorly-conceived training that they did not need; he was rude and arrogant to his fellow-officers, and he made a habit of bawling his men out whenever an opportunity presented itself. He

may have thought that he was demonstrating firm authority but those around him thought he was showing himself to be an idiot and a liability.

One of the NCOs in the Company Headquarters, Lance Corporal ‘Nosher’ Paulson, was responsible for the radio communications within the company. 2Lt Saxby made a particular enemy of him, giving him several undeserved ‘bollockings’ over the radio net for lack of professionalism which incensed him. LCpl Paulson was called ‘Nosher’ for good reason as he was known to become aggressive and punchy when drunk, though he had recently been sufficiently restrained to stay out of trouble long enough to rise to the rank of lance corporal. One evening there was a company party, a celebration of the company’s identity, at which all members were present. LCpl Paulson became nastily drunk during the later stages of this celebration, his friends afterwards saying that this was a deliberate act to give him an ‘excuse’ for what he was about to do. Drunk as he was, he managed to corner 2Lt Saxby and attacked him violently, landing several painful punches before he was dragged off and placed in one of the cells in the guard room.

Knowing that LCpl Paulson had been behaving himself for some time, the CO called in his Company Commander before going through the inevitable formal summary jurisdiction process – inevitable because no NCO can expect to get away with hitting a commissioned officer. The CO wanted to know the antecedents to the incident to gauge how seriously it should be treated, so he asked the Company Commander why the Paulson had done it. The Company Commander replied “Because he got there before I did” and he gave a full explanation of the thoroughly bad behavior of the young officer.

LCpl Paulson was charged with a comparatively minor offence that did not require him to undergo a Court Martial, which would almost certainly have resulted in



him being discharged from the Army. The Commanding Officer found him guilty of this charge and reduced him to the rank of private, with consequent loss of pay and status. However, within six months he was reinstated as a lance corporal and restored to his post (in a very short time in Army career terms). 2Lt Saxby was quickly posted away from the battalion.

This appears at first sight to have been a disruptive secondary adjustment, a piece of high octane dissent. A serious offence is committed in front of many witnesses, and is followed up by summary jurisdiction and formal punishment. However, the incident was not dealt with as seriously as it might have been. Essentially, the authorities only went as far as they had to: they went through the motions of discipline and punishment whilst ensuring that LCpl Paulson suffered as little as possible. They used their empowerment to mitigate the punishment according to an unofficial assessment of justice for the corporal and just deserts for the officer (physical injury and speedy removal from the battalion).

## **Discussion**

The cases set out in this article suggest that, however firm and clear the rules may appear, their observance and enforcement by the agents involved needs to be seen as part of a culturally-informed process played out in the context of everyday organizational life. The British Army appears to be a particularly interesting milieu for research in this area because of its public image as a rule-based total institution.

The evidence is that British soldiers' lives are not rigidly rule-dominated, that rules are bent or broken or managed in certain circumstances with and without the approval of authority agents. Indeed, there is an expectation that they will be bent or broken at certain times as we saw in the case of Sgt Parish's buckshees. In essence,

rules have the appearance of the absolute but they lose their absoluteness as they are played out in the complex processes of daily life. In spite of this complexity, and in particular the multiplicity and the changeability of the variables, soldiers navigate the maze of rule obedience rule avoidance and rule breaking with apparent ease in the course of their daily lives at regimental duty. Such things are absorbed into the processes of daily life and acted upon and played out in the exercise of practical sense acquired through those very processes (see Bourdieu's painstaking descriptions of this process, 1990).

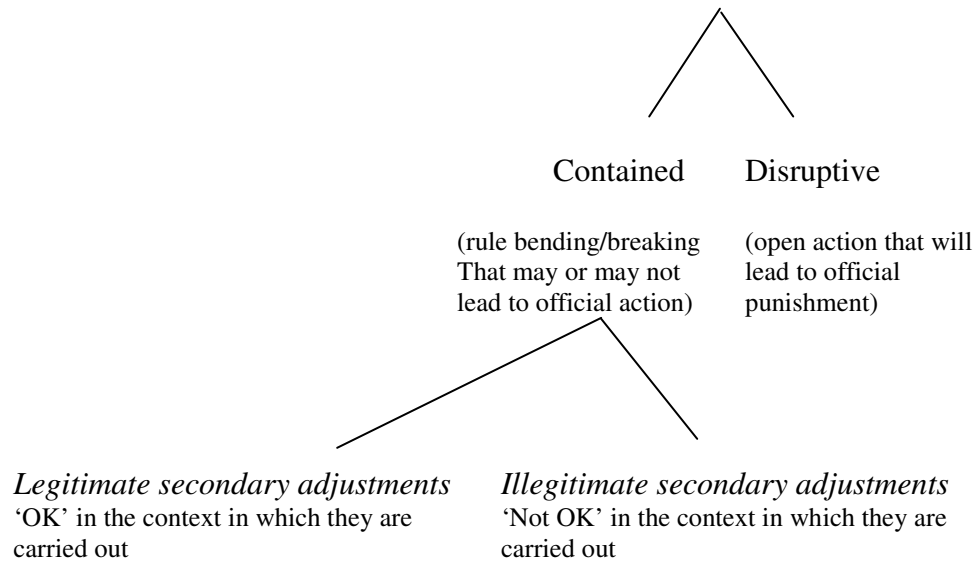
Figure One is a model that attempts a unifying framework of analysis for rule bending/breaking in the Army, based on the various aspects brought forward in this article. It seeks to capture Goffman's logical distinctions between primary and secondary adjustments, contained and disruptive secondary adjustments, and this article's expansion into the legitimate and illegitimate contained secondary adjustments. It also offers a means to locate the role of the authority agent in defining them, and the potential for negotiations between junior and senior, as these logical distinctions are played out in the processes of every day life.

**Primary Adjustments**

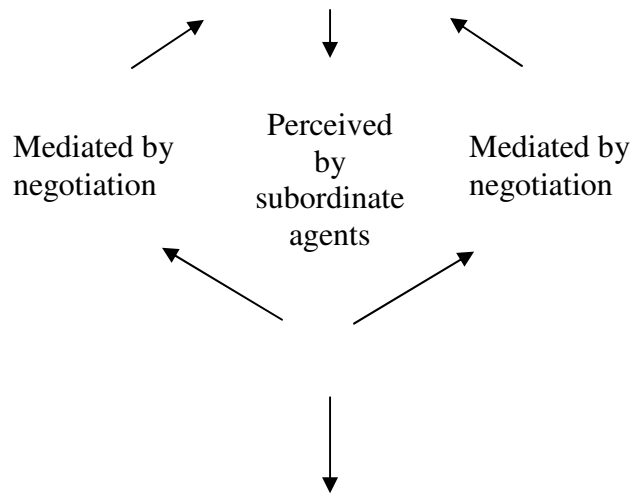
(obeying the rules)

**Secondary Adjustments**

(bending/breaking the rules)



Defined by Authority Agent(s)



Observed rule bending  
breaking behaviour

Lines [ — ] indicate logical (cognitive) distinctions

Arrows [ —> ] indicate action and/or social process

(Author's diagram, developed from Goffman's characterization)

**Figure One: Primary and Secondary Adjustments**

This framework, however, begs an important question, a sort of ‘elephant in the room’ – a presence that everyone can see but is not commented upon – that lurks beneath all the cases so far. It may be possible to observe that rule bending and rule breaking are present in the Army, and trace their anatomy by the use of frameworks, but in an apparently rule-based organization, why are rules broken or bent in the first place?

Simple logic suggests that there is no single reason. In some cases, such as the first three cited and the case of LCpl Paulson, the rule-breaker is taking revenge on a superior, analogous to a personal act of sabotage. However, we need to go beyond this first level of analysis. Why did the perpetrators want to sabotage the well-being of their superiors? It is interesting that in all four cases they were reacting against what they appear to have seen as an abuse of formal authority. The ‘old school’ sergeant was over-strict with his men; everyone disliked the sergeant who became tangled in his sleeping bag; the cavalry officer messed his soldiers about; LCpl Paulson was striking out at a superior who had made his life difficult and undermined his soldierly reputation. It appears therefore that those acts of misbehaviour carried a message of disapproval and put pressure on the senior person to change their behaviour. They therefore act as an unofficial means of communication and an unstated vector for correction.

In other cases, rules are bent or broken in a way that appears to be inspired by an unofficial sense of ‘justice’ that transcends the formal rules. LCpl Paulson’s punishment for what was, strictly speaking, an organizationally damaging act, was managed by his CO in such a way as to do him the least possible harm because there

was unofficially seen to be justice in the fate that he meted out to his objectionable superior.

Rule bending or breaking can also, as we have seen, be advantageous to those concerned by making their lives easier, without seriously compromising the effectiveness and reputation of those parts of the organization to which they belong, or perhaps even enhancing them. Many legitimate secondary adjustments seem to fall into this category, as in the case of the hidden trade in buckshees which obviates the need for tedious and expensive procedures in replacing lost equipment. In this category, an interesting parallel may be the forbidden use of the 'tap' by American aircraft workers in the 1950s described by Bensman and Gerver (1963), where a device for illegally overcoming a misalignment of aircraft parts by tapping a new threaded hole was in routine use. Its use was organizationally necessary to avoid losing time on a task and was unofficially managed through the shop-floor organizational management system. Similarly, Malcolm Young has described the manipulation of crime and detection statistics by a British police force in the 1960s and 1970s to make particular police organizations appear successful (Young, 1991). Such acts are against the rules but permitted (or even encouraged) because without them the organization might fail in its purposes.

Useful as Figure One might be in tracing the lineaments of any one incident and providing a basis for comparison between incidents, therefore, its use would be incomplete without immersing the resulting analysis in the organizational cultural processes that surround each incident. We would need to consider such aspects as the sense of justice or injustice shared by the agents involved, where they differ in this respect, and how. We would need to explore the social and emotional networks that surround each case, and how they are acted out within the rank system. We would

need to see where the joints and divisions lie within and between the organizational groups involved and we need to consider the concepts and feelings about being 'soldierly' and how all these impinge on the playing out of the incident. We need to look for the messages that such acts imply, to search for the negotiations that they might represent, and to be prepared to explore any organizational advantage that they might unofficially bring.

Let us look again at LCpl Paulson's attack on 2Lt Saxby. In the emotionally and socially bonded infantry company 2Lt Saxby was an outsider, parachuted in, as it were, from another world (that of Sandhurst via his home military organization). He had no feeling for the organizational culture of the battalion to which he was attached or that of the infantry company he found himself in. By his behaviour he isolated himself from the network of friends and allies that should have been available to him through his fellow officers (all members of the same social institution, the Officers' Mess) or the NCOs in his platoon, and particularly his platoon sergeant. His idea of soldierly standards was at odds with those of his men (he put them through training they considered unnecessary) and he personally and repeatedly demeaned LCpl Paulson by criticising his soldierly attributes as a signals detachment commander. This activity put him in a position where he remained a remote outsider while physically occupying a space in the organization. All this needs to be described before one can competently use the ideas encapsulated in Figure One to understand why Cpl Paulson's disruptive secondary adjustment was treated superficially as illegitimate but silently as 'OK'.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined some particular cases of British soldiers' behaviour in the face of rules. It has shown that rules may be fixed but their observance or otherwise is a social process that is under the control of the agents of authority whilst still being open to a degree of negotiation. It has noted some of the key ideas arising in social science about 'misbehaviour' or 'resistance' or 'dissent'. Going beyond generic models of resistance etc. and Hockey's of negotiated order, via Goffman's of primary and secondary adjustments, important variables have been identified in the practice of rule observance, rule bending, and rule breaking in the Army.

Identification of those variables here has allowed the construction of a structured diagram which provides a framework to help in the analysis of particular incidents. However, each time this framework is used it should be located in its particular rich ethnographic milieu because without that it may produce little more than sociological labels – convenient enough perhaps for structural analysis of events and for comparison of one incident with another, but lacking the breath and warmth and richness of real life as it is lived which must be the first concern of the successful ethnographer.

We began with cases of informal revenge and ended with another, very much less subtle but still action taken against a formal superior by a junior. One of the questions posed at the start of this paper was whether or not such acts of revenge are exotic one-offs that fall outside the cultural norms of the Army or whether they are in some way consistent with the organizational culture. These questions can now be answered.

Acts of rule breaking or bending can be placed on a continuum of secondary adjustments from mild legitimate ones such as the hiding of buckshees from the QM (Tech)'s inspection through to serious (if rare) disruptive ones such as the striking of a

superior officer, all of which need to be viewed through the lens of the organizational culture and the flow of events surrounding them. Far from being one-off counter-cultural events, acts of disobedience appear to be particular manifestations of a regular rule bending and rule breaking cultural pattern played out in daily practice. Viewing them in this way, as particular examples of legitimate or illegitimate secondary adjustments rather than simply as acts of 'resistance' or 'misbehaviour', locates them in the robust and engaging organizational culture of the British Army, where they belong.

Finally, we might bear such considerations in mind when we see high profile cases of apparently illegitimate activity by soldiers reported in the media, cases such as 'bullying' or 'prisoner abuse' or 'initiation', for example. We may ask ourselves to what extent these are the actions of deviant people misusing the authority vested in them and to what extent they are secondary adjustments arising in particular contexts, part of the flow of personal and collective histories, taking place with or without authority agents' signals of 'OK-ness' or 'not-OK-ness', and in the context of organizational cultural norms. Such questions are the province of the ethnographer and without the involvement of ethnographers with the necessary legal investigators perhaps the true nature of these events will remain undiscovered and true justice denied.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Gun Number One is responsible for all equipment associated with an artillery piece and for the operational standards of himself and his men (his 'detachment'). He also has further responsibilities for the training and welfare of his gun detachment.

<sup>2</sup> The series of ranks in the British Army are at [http://www.army.mod.uk/hq\\_itg/rank.htm](http://www.army.mod.uk/hq_itg/rank.htm), accessed 21 August 2007. In outline, there are three types of rank found in an operational unit, starting from the bottom: private soldiers and Non-Commissioned Officers (privates, lance-corporals, corporals, sergeants and staff sergeants, who exercise small scale command and authority over small teams); warrant officers (WO 2 and WO 1) who have greater authority and typically form an important layer of management at sub-unit level; commissioned officers (second lieutenants, lieutenants, captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels who hold the Queen's Commission). The subject is far too complex for a full explanation in a footnote, but suffice it to say that the unit is commanded by a lieutenant colonel with a WO1 as their regimental sergeant major, sub-units are commanded by majors with a WO2 as their sergeant major, that young officers (lieutenants and second lieutenants) are expected still to be learning their profession at least until they reach Captain and so are assisted, and in some cases informally supervised by, senior NCOs. The system is not so much hierarchical as a horizontally and vertically looped network within a hierarchical framework.

<sup>3</sup> 'Soldier' in this paper refers to any uniformed member of a military unit, regardless of rank. To gauge the status of the soldier(s) in question a further qualification is needed, either involving the citing of a rank or by a statement such as 'junior' or 'senior', or as here, a group to which they belong (the squadron in question).

<sup>4</sup> The Army Act 1955 has (largely) been replaced by the Armed Forces Act 2006, which introduces a Tri-Service discipline structure. However, the Army Act 1955 is the body of law which formed the legal disciplinary background to the times and places in which this article is set.

<sup>5</sup> NUD\*IST 6 is fully described in Sage (1997). Essentially, it allows the researcher to build a flexible database from whole documents and text units, creating searchable nodes, categories and hierarchies of data that can be developed, amended, and restructured as the research progresses.

<sup>6</sup> In essence, the 'best practice' which was developing during the study and is currently encoded in the ASA Ethical Code (ASA 2009) was followed.

<sup>7</sup> 'Battery' is the name for a sub unit in an artillery regiment. The type of unit in which this incident took place comprised four batteries, each of approximately 100 soldiers.

<sup>8</sup> 'Buckshee' is a universal British Army word for 'unrecorded or unregistered item', or in a related sense 'free' or 'unimportant'. It appears to come from the Hindi word 'backsheesh'.

<sup>9</sup> Four-wheeled military vehicle.

<sup>10</sup> This condition of service could also be used to get four rail warrants (i.e. to have four free railway journeys). These, however, did not involve any exchange of cash and so profit could be made from them.

<sup>11</sup> There may an interesting parallel here with Gouldner's characterization of an 'indulgency pattern' (1954: 45-56) where supervisors and managers create conditions in which rules are not strictly enforced, with a resulting raising of the workers' quality of life at work. This could be otherwise described as a regime rich in legitimate secondary adjustments.

<sup>12</sup> 'War-y' (various spellings) was an unofficial army term meaning that operational aspects were being taken too seriously.

<sup>13</sup> 'Regimental duty' is the term that refers to service in formed military unit as opposed to a headquarters or in other staff posts.

<sup>14</sup> All were male because at that time (and it is still the case) women are barred from joining the Infantry.

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# Orders is orders... aren't they? Rule bending and rule breaking in the British Army

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