

***A Post-Graduate Researchers' Symposium on Conscription
into the South African Defence Force
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“Contemplating shadows under a different sun”

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Introduction

I remember the moment clearly, it was the mid-1970s and I must have been between 8 and 10 years old. I was in the family car; a green Ford Escort, with my father at the wheel. My brother and I were sitting in the back seats, kept in check by my grandmother. We were traveling towards the south peninsula, more than likely Muizenberg beach, as we drove by Youngsfield military base. A platoon of soldiers, in full kit were drilling alongside the perimeter fence of the base. I asked my grandmother whether I would need to go to the army one day and I can recall her reply clearly, 'Don't worry, you won't have to go to the border, you'll just play soldiers like those boys.'

Her reply remained with me, and framed my childhood concept of national service within the SADF. Many white South Africans viewed national service as a necessary social duty; an entirely natural male rite of passage, rationalised by sound bites such as, 'the army will make a man out of you.' The presence of the Border War cast a pervasive shadow over white South African society during the 70s and 80s, scaffolded by ominous phrases such as 'total onslaught' and 'rooi gevaar'. Every aspect of the state's apparatus was employed to formulate a 'total strategy', that involved the militarization of the nation's white youth from an early age. Jacklyn Cock (1988) notes that Enloe's (1983) analysis of 'militarism' involves a gradual 'intrusion and encroachment' (Cock and Nathan 3: 1988) into civilian environments.

The manner in which South African society was gradually intruded upon and militarized, reaching its apogee in the mid-1980s, involved a nuanced and complex ideology in order to preserve the status quo of white minority rule. By the mid-1980s, the SADF relied heavily on regular intakes of white conscripts to combat increased resistance within and beyond the borders of South Africa. Although Cock and Nathan (1988) rightly note that militarisation is a 'contested concept' (1988:2) and part of a complex social process that takes place on an economic, political and ideological level (1988:2), it is the ideological mechanisms that were employed to militarise white male youths of the apartheid era that are of importance to this paper. These mechanisms included utilising the resources of a largely state-controlled media, allied to Christian National Education (CNE), the school cadet system, and forms of consumerist militarism (Jochelson and Buntman in Cock and Nathan 1988).

'Casting shadows' - Ideological mechanisms of militarization

Irrespective of the cultural and political differences of apartheid-era white English and Afrikaans citizens, the ideological mechanisms of militarization required the compliance of white South African familial structures. The very notion of handing over an 18 year old son for 24 months of military service to the state demanded substantial parental and familial compliance. In this regard, the National Party government employed a coercive rhetoric of fear, portraying the threat of communist expansion in Southern Africa as a means to justify conscription and national military preparedness.

Many ex-SADF conscripts still have a fervent belief that they played a vital role in stemming a communist tide of domination in Southern Africa. This belief appears continues to act as a form of justification for ex-conscripts within the post post-apartheid space. Conscripts were portrayed as defenders and 'protectors' of a Christian-based social order, of 'home and hearth' (Cock 1990), the antithesis of the 'rooi gevaar'.

Why were we there? It's simple really, we were fighting to prevent a communist take-over of South Africa. That's what people don't understand. It wasn't about race or politics. It's a lot more complex than that. (Ex-conscript interview, December 2015)

Women often played a crucial role in perpetuating these gendered identities, yet the role of the male as 'protector' carries a unique set of burdens. Cock notes the hidden strain of manliness in her seminal book, *Colonels and Cadres - War and Gender in South Africa* (1991), drawing attention to the subtleties of gender relations in apartheid era South Africa, and its determinants, that 'operate mainly to privilege men and subordinate women' (Cock 1990: 26).

The SADF, acting as a 'government agency,' employed further agents such as Christian National Education (CNE) to inculcate a sense of militarized preparedness in the white youth of the 1980s. The fallout and unspoken burden of these programmes continue to be felt within the contested spaces of present day South Africa. I believe it is imperative that ex-SADF conscripts continue to give an account of their 'militarised journeys' in order to navigate the ambiguities of the present with honesty and humanity.

The germination of a militarized masculinity begins in childhood. Jochelson and Buntman note that 'toys embody social and cultural definitions of what constitutes appropriate interests, activities and (the) behaviour of children' (Cock and Nathan 1988: 299).

My friends and I used to play war games in an open plot at the end of our road. No one wanted to be the *terrorists*. I used to wear my Dad's army webbing and his *staaldak*. We used broomsticks and bits of wood as R1s. (Ex-conscript interview, December 2015)

Toys are echoes of the adult world, and war toys, such as toy guns, reinforce the notion that a military solution is masculine, collective and a socially accepted response. The mythology of combat, perceived as inherently honourable and courageous, often has its origins within the formative realms of childhood, aided by the media and popular literature. Apartheid era war toys were almost exclusively masculine, including a plethora of plastic replica guns, miniature vehicles, scale models and associated literature.

Examples include boys' comics of the 1980s (*Battle*, *Warlord*, *Battle Picture Library* and *Action*). Although many of these comics were published by Egmont in the United Kingdom, and mainly included World War 1 and 2 narratives, they dominated the children's magazine shelves of news agents such as CNA and Paperbacks. These weekly comics provided largely idealized scenarios, entrenching stereotypes of a non-human enemy (in this case, the Axis powers), indirectly serving the needs of a regime that relied heavily on a dichotomous 'us' and 'them' mentality, underpinned by a racist ideology.

Yes, I grew up on *Battle* and *Tiger* comics. The Germans and Japanese were always portrayed as the enemy, much like the *terrorists* of the Border War, although I never drew any parallels between the two. (Ex-conscript interview, December 2015)

In addition, popular local photo comic books of the 1970s and 1980s such *Grensvegter* and *Kaptein Caprivi* (which appeared in popular Afrikaans magazines such as *Huisgenoot*) were heroic constructions of white masculinity, protecting home and hearth from the total onslaught of the *rooi* and *swart gevaar*. Scott (2011) notes in her thesis on comics and war that comic book heroes are often iconic mirrors of dominant political, patriotic and gendered ideals. In the case of the *Grensvegter* and *Kaptein Caprivi* comics the enemy was often portrayed as bearded, (possibly alluding to Cuban soldiers who were deployed in Angola during the Border War) whereas the moustachioed hero, assisted by a trusty black side-kick, would be tasked with a perilous rescue mission involving a damsel in distress. These narrative templates served to reinforce and impress stereotypical views of race and gender on white males. These altered realities were always populated by a demonised enemy lacking in Christian morality and humanity, that could only be rectified by the likes of Rocco de Wet (*Grensvegter*) or Kaptein Caprivi.

The influence of film cannot be dismissed either. The Afrikaans *Boetie* films, *Boetie Gaan Border Toe!* (1984) and *Boetie op Manoeuvres* (1985), directed by Regardt van den Bergh are good examples, and were released at the height of the regimes military power. The *Boetie* films were military comedies that portrayed the SADF conscript experience as a necessary rite of passage, with the protagonist, Boetie (played by Arnold Vosloo), ultimately gaining self-respect and maturity as a result of his army experience. The redemptive narrative is clearly patriotic, presenting acceptable gendered and racial stereotypes that underwrite the dominant political views of the time.

Even innocuous toys such as yo-yos were transformed into consumer militarist commodities, emblazoned with SADF insignia, as ‘statement(s) of moral support’ (Cock and Nathan 1988: 305). Other examples include a Border War themed board game culminating in a successful ‘contact’ with ‘terrorists’, with the proceeds of sales going to the Southern Cross Fund. Cock notes that according to Frankel (1984:98), ‘the actual effect of the Southern Cross Fund is to market militarization in a way which encourages public identification’ (Zack-Williams 2004: 139).

Military ceremonies, such as airshows and tattoos were impressive displays of power, encouraging a strong masculine sense of patriotism. These events were marketed by the SADF as family events, including the sale of memorabilia and flags, as a day out for fathers and sons, where civilians could experience the military might of the SADF face-to-face.

I remember going to an airshow at Ysterplaat in the early 80s. The sound of thoses Mirages is what did it for me. I remember writing to the airforce when I was in Standard 8. I wanted to be a fighter pilot. (Ex-conscript interview, December 2015)

Cock also notes that these ‘overt’ shows of militaty power assured civilians that ‘the defence of the nation’ (Cock and Nathan 1988: 305) was intact and in good hands, yet as indicated by the statement above, these events were a seductive means of encouraging young males to pursue a military career.

'Casting shadows in classrooms' - School boys in browns

I didn't play rugby. That's what everyone else did. I wasn't being a rebel; I was just reclusive enough to never need to run around in packs. Instead I became a marksman, and it was at high school, while standing next to my shooting coach at a regional Bisley (that's a shooting competition) that I watched young Afrikaans kids in Cadet uniforms march in ranks down the hill towards their positions on the shooting range. 'There go the Hitler youth,' my coach said to me. (<https://justkickingstones.wordpress.com/tag/school-cadets>)

By the time apartheid era boys entered the high school environment of the white education system, the ground for Cock's notion of 'ideological coercion' (Cock 1990: 69) had been well prepared. During the 1980s registration for compulsory military service took place within the school environment and was generally accepted as a rite of passage for all 16 year old white males. Non-compliance was unheard of, and in most instances registration took place in Standard Eight (Grade 10) and involved the entire year group. The school cadet system, which involved a coordinated effort between the SADF and provincial education departments, was officially brought under SADF control in January 1976, although it had existed in various guises beforehand.

The invasion of Angola, and specifically the Soweto uprising in 1976 unsettled any notion of internal stability within South Africa. The school cadet system provided an ideal platform to instill a sense of military preparedness (civil defence) amongst the nation's white male youth, which would 'serve as a nursery for national service' (Frankel 1984: 99). Cock notes that the SADF hoped the cadet corps would 'develop a sense of responsibility and love for their country and national flag' (Cock 1990: 69) and in turn develop an awareness of the malevolent revolutionary forces that threatened South Africa (*Paratus*, September 1980). Interestingly, the cadet system was perceived by the SADF as a potential intelligence gathering network, whereby pupils were encouraged to report any 'actual or potential enemies' (70) to a cadet officer, more than likely a teacher, as soon as possible.

I hated cadets and the way the teachers wore their uniforms, showing off their rank. Thinking back on it, we must have looked like the Hitler Youth when we used to march down the main street of our town. (Ex-conscript interview, December 2015)

The cadet system relied heavily on teacher compliance. In most instances teachers were ex-SADF conscripts and would don their uniform and be addressed according to their rank during the weekly cadet corps training sessions or lectures. During Standard Eight (Grade

10), the registration year for military service, there was a shift in the cadet corps curriculum towards actual military practices such as map reading, civil defence, enemy propaganda, 'the necessity of compulsory military service' (Cock 1990: 70) and a strong emphasis on physical fitness. An ex-conscript recalls,

Those who had actual rhythm in them joined the drill squads, but the best of all was the bivouac camps. Spending a weekend in the bush, doing camouflaging and getting to shoot target practice with R4's, R5's, LMG's, 9mms, etc. It was quite something for the city slickers.

(<http://mybroadband.co.za/vb/showthread.php/426529-Cadets-at-school>)

These shifts served to cement an ideology that romanticized a hegemonic and militarized sense of masculinity, where national service was perceived as a performative act of good citizenship.

Cadets prepared us for the army. We were taught to march, some guys actually got to handle R1 rifles, but most of use thought it was a joke.

(Ex-conscript interview, December 2015)

It is important to note that the efficacy of the cadet system varied from school from school, and across English and Afrikaans speaking schools. Cock notes that information gathered from a series of interviews with school cadet officers between 1982 and 1983 revealed 'considerable variation in the way the programmes were implemented, with Afrikaans schools tending to be far more enthusiastic.' School with 'low-key programmes' were encouraged to 'upgrade' (Cock and Nathan 1988: 285-286). The SADF clearly understood the value of instilling a nationalist ideology during the impressionable adolescent years drawing on physical, moral and even spiritual values espoused by Christian National Education (CNE).

Msila (2007) notes that apartheid era education was never a 'neutral act' (146), clearly influenced by a dominant and racially divisive political discourse that entrenched white privilege. CNE not only espoused the values of the Nationalist regime, opposing a long established British system of education, but attempted to instill a system 'grounded in the life and worldview of the Whites most especially those of the Boer nation as senior White trustee of the native...' (as noted in Article 15 of the CNE policy of 1948). Msila (2007: 149) points out that CNE was aided by indoctrination 'programmes' such as *veldskools* (bush schools) that were established under the 'pretext of nature study.' *Veldskools* provided ideal forums for the dissemination of SADF propaganda, fear mongering and a means to prepare white youths for national service.

*'Becoming a shadow' - Induction into the SADF***Call-up / Stephen Symons**

*I remember a day when every father
became an Abraham and every son an Isaac.*

*There was no poised blade breaking sunlight,
just the hum of idling buses
treading the beginnings of day.*

*Somewhere rams were caught in the fynbos,
waiting to take the place of the Isaacs
but no Angel of God intervened.*

*There was just the firm grip of sons' hands
by fathers and the impatience of the engines.*

Draper (2001) cites that Flisher's psychological study of the induction process of conscription argues that the initial stages of national service can be discussed within the theoretical framework of crisis theory. Flisher asserts that two types of life crises present themselves to conscripts; namely developmental and transitional life crises. The notion that conscripts were faced with a transitional life crisis, one that involved both 'intellectual and emotional disorders' (Draper 2001) and physical hardships is of importance to understanding the transition from civilian life into a military environment, and specifically basic training. An ex-conscript explains,

Ja, it was the worst day of my life. The buses waiting for us, having to say good-bye to my parents, and everyone putting on a brave face. I guess it was the fear of the unknown that had taken hold of everyone. You could almost feel it. It was probably worse than my time on the Border. At least you knew what was waiting for you on the Border. (Ex-conscript interview, December 2015)

Conscript narratives relating to basic training sheds much light on the socialization process and its subsequent impact – it marks the first performative act of citizenship (Graham 2012; Conway 2012) and thus enshrines a formative and ritualised stage of the development of a militarised masculinity, which continues to resonate within white memory. These memories have shifted from previously subjugated spaces and have entered the opportune confessional

spaces of the democratic era (Baines 2012, 2014; Doherty 2014; Edlmann 2014).

Gibson notes that many conscripts were possibly coerced into perceiving that conscription was a necessary patriotic duty, pressured by parental and familial expectations (Gibson 2010).

I was never patriotic. I would have never enlisted willingly. Who would have? In a sense, I felt I had to do it. My parents, or should I say my father, expected it of me. My friends had all completed their national service. It was something we'd grown up with. (Ex-conscript interview, December 2015)

These views, held by many conscripts, were the result of a complex socialisation process that was pervasive in white South African society (Gibson 2009). Cock considers this socialisation process in great detail in *War and Society* (Cock and Nathan 1989), and proposes that militarisation is a 'contested concept' (Cock and Nathan 1989: 2) and should be distinguished as three social phenomena, namely: the military as a social institution, militarism as an ideology and militarisation as a social process. *War and Society* (Cock and Nathan 1989) initiated insights into the SADF at a time in which conscription was still enforced, and provided a unique overview of the social and psychological effects of conscription, including an examination of SADF ideologies and structure.

Conway (2012) echoes the voices of *War and Society* and observes 'that one of the most consistent features of pre-1994 South African society was progressive militarisation, in terms of both activity and the social conditions necessary for war making' (33). Cawthra notes that the process of induction into the SADF involved the stripping away of a conscript's individuality and sense of identity (Cawthra et al 1994).

Infantry Basics was tough. Looking back, it makes sense that the army had to break us down. At the time, some of us laughed, while others cried. Of course there were guys, mostly the Afrikaans guys, who took great pride in playing soldiers. There were others who simply killed themselves, or at least injured themselves to try get out of basics. (Ex-conscript interview, December 2015)

During basic training, the army stole a part of our humanity. If I think hard about it, it's probably still out there. (Ex-conscript interview, December 2015)

Basic training played a crucial role in the depersonalisation of young white males, and was a deeply traumatic experience for many conscripts, often resulting in psychological damage, and even suicide (Cock 1989, Cawthra et al 1994). Interestingly, Cock, Conway and Cawthra

give no detailed account of the actual process of induction and basic training, and how the experience resonates for conscripts within a contemporary space, presenting a gap in scholarly research that requires further research. My PhD thesis hopes to address this gap.

The thing is everyone concentrates on the Border War. There is no literature about basic training, which was tough for every single conscript. Not everyone ended up on the Border or in the townships, but no one escaped basics. For some, surviving basics was the most traumatic experience of their army stint.

(Ex-conscript interview, December 2015)

Many of the ex-conscripts that I conversed with, particularly those who had not been engaged in combat, saw basic training as a rite of passage within a highly militarised hegemony. These notions continue to resonate decades later in a vastly different South Africa (Conway 2012). The following is an extract from Chapter 8 (Volume 4) of the Special Hearing: Compulsory Military Service (Conscription) from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report. It demonstrates the pervasive influence and effects of the experience for ex-conscripts:

13. A psychologist whose clients include ex-SADF conscripts echoed these views. In a written submission to the Commission, Ms Trudy de Ridder of the Trauma Centre for the Victims of Violence and Torture, Cape Town, reported that: Most ex-conscripts report that they, their peers and their community saw service in the SADF as a natural part of growing up and 'becoming a man'.. The national education system consistently presented military training as a given part of the rites of passage of white men and the moral duty of anyone concerned with defending order and morality (Christianity) against the forces of evil and chaos (Soviet-inspired Communism)...

My recent experience with ex-conscripts has been characterised by their insistence that they could not have had the tools or information to challenge this view - especially at the age of seventeen or eighteen. Most report that, once in the SADF, resistance to the fact of conscription, the chain of command or the politico-military objectives was unthinkable. In fact, most still associate their military experiences with a sense of pride - in their capacity for physical and psychological endurance... (O'Malley 2015)

'Digital shadow's - Memories of conscription in the digital domain

Ex-SADF conscript narratives and histories exist within a memory field that is markedly descriptive, white and self-reflective, and often silenced. These silences have been prompted by notions of guilt, perpetratorship, trauma and obvious political shifts since 1994.

I draw on the work of three thinkers who have shaped a theory of counter-memory; primarily George Lipsitz, and to a lesser extent, Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault. American sociologist, George Lipsitz's concept of counter-memory describes how memories unearth the past, exposing 'hidden histories' that have been excluded from dominant narratives (Lipsitz 1990: 213). Lipsitz views counter-memory as a means of shifting historical focus from dominant narratives, an attempt to re-negotiate the present, thus challenging the 'hegemony of dominant discourse' (Lipsitz 1990: 212).

One may argue that the counter-memories of ex-SADF conscripts appear to be emerging at a point in South African history, presided over by a dominant political memory of exclusion, entering a space where many conscripts (whether rightly or wrongly) perceive dominant narratives subjugate their histories (Baines 2014). According to Lipsitz, these official memories always provide discontinuities or gaps for counter-memories to emerge (Williams 1977: 112; Lipsitz 1990).

The internet, with its blogosphere, forums, social media platforms and websites appear to have provided a forum for these counter-memories to emerge. The Web presents a diverse range of conscript narratives, opinions and histories, most notably expressed on websites such as *Sentinel Projects*. Sentinel Projects is the most extensive online repository of personal accounts of military service in the SADF. It presents personal narratives, 'homage' pages, photo galleries, military unit sub-forums, official ex-SADF documents, histories, virtual walk-throughs and hyperlinks to other websites of a similar theme. An example is the detailed account of induction into the SADF given by André, a qualified clinical psychologist (Sadf. sentinelprojects.com 2015).

Many SADF social media groups and forums exist. Among the more popular social media platforms are Facebook¹ and the SADF Living History Group (<http://sadfgroup.org/>), an online community that notes that it is a non-political organisation that 'does not glorify war' but seeks to 'educate about the humanity' of those 'who served' (SADF GROUP 2015).

¹ Among the more popular social media sites are the following Facebook groups:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/grensoorlog/> (31 000 members as of Oct. 2015)
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/BorderWar/> (20 000 members as of Oct. 2015)
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/100757163371431/> (4 000 members as of Oct. 2015)

Bush War Books (<http://www.warbooks.co.za/>) is an online store dedicated to selling literature relating to recent Southern African conflicts, specifically the Border War. This website gives one an extensive overview of current popular literature that encompasses ex-SADF conscript narratives. The homepage of the website features the following quote, 'War does not determine who is right - only who is left' (Warbooks.co.za 2015).

Tim Hewitt-Coleman's blog *www.slegtroep.blogspot.com* provides a unique commentary in that he attempts to create an intersection of past and present, posing questions regarding the role of ANC in 'subverting' the histories of conscripts. Hewitt-Coleman writes,

What is more surprising though is that as the ANC became dominant, so little effort has been made to record and popularise this significant episode [The Battle of Cuito Cuanavale], where conventional forces came head to head in Southern Angola in the late eighties, resulting in a bloody and crushing battle, which led to a South African withdrawal from Angola, the acceptance of UN resolution 435 and the paving of the way for UNTAG to take control in Namibia. All this, a very significant blow to the forces of Apartheid,but no real contribution from MK and the ANC.....Is it because the ANC cannot claim involvement in this defeat of the Apartheid System that we will pass slowly into the past without being acknowledged by "History"? (Hewitt-Coleman 2009)

The majority of these online narratives are related to the Border War narratives, although some posts do focus on the period of induction. Baines notes in *A virtual community? SADF veterans' digital memories and dissenting discourses* (2012) that much like the Vietnam War, 'the Border War was followed by a relative - not absolute - silence' (2012:4). Baines adds that 'ex-SADF conscripts have gravitated to the apparent political neutrality of cyberspace' (2012:8) and therefore rely on the anonymity of the internet to 'contest their invisibility in post-apartheid' South Africa. This is of importance, given its need to explore various modes of expression employed by conscripts as they navigate the ambiguities of post post-apartheid spaces.

Baines proposes that the internet provides conscripts and veterans with a means to challenge what Gear refers to as the 'silence of stigmatized knowledge' in her essay *The Road Back: Psychosocial Strains of Transition* (Baines and Vale, 2008). In this sense, Baines rightly notes that cyberspace allows ex-SADF conscripts to 'preserve a sense of belonging to a community - albeit a virtual one'(2012:14); that essentially counters dominant histories.

Art historian TJ Demos notes that collective counter-memories often facilitate positive transformation, specifically if they antagonise established narratives (Demos 2012). These collective counter-memories ‘designate(s) a practice of memory formation that is social and political, one that runs counter to the official histories of governments, mainstream mass media, and the society of the spectacle’ (Demos 2012). Demos understands counter-memory as an act of memorialisation; ‘a collective practice of relearning - of forgotten, suppressed, and excluded histories’(Demos 2012).

These ‘alternatives’ to official and dominant histories of ex-SADF conscripts appear to have found a home in the realms of cyberspace.

‘Stepping into the sun’ - Conclusion

We, as South Africans and ex-conscripts, need to grapple with these ‘configurations’ of masculinity and militarisation, specifically in relation to race (whiteness) within the post-apartheid space.

Mary Corrigan’s review of the exhibition *Not My War* (June – July 2012) at the Michaelis Galleries (Michaelis School of Fine Art, UCT) notes,

‘...the paradoxical position of the white conscript as a victim of a system that was designed to benefit those of his race made it difficult for border veterans’ stories to enter the public discourse because they contradicted the dominant nationalist narrative that the ANC had established, where those who fought on behalf of the apartheid state were the perpetrators, while those who battled against them undeniably occupied the position of victims. In other words it had become politically incorrect for whites to articulate their ambivalent roles. And so it was that for almost a decade after democracy, the silence around the border wars remained undisturbed, unchallenged.’²

However, Natasha Norman’s essay *In the Foxholes of History* that accompanied the exhibition warns that the ‘The recent growth in an emerging white discourse of the Border War is powerfully cathartic, however new borders are likely to emerge in this discourse if it is not kept within the perspective of a larger socio-political framework.’³

² Read Corrigan’s complete review here: <http://corrigan.blogspot.co.za/2012/07/the-silent-war.html#more>

³ Natasha Norman’s essay *In the Foxholes of History* is accessible at: <http://notmywarproject.blogspot.co.za/>

The navigation and decoding of the ambiguities that face all ex-SADF conscripts, not only those who experienced combat, have meaningful implications for the welfare and shared histories of broader South African society.

Now is the time for these men to give an account of their experiences, to give voice to their memories, to reveal and explore their hidden archives. This, I believe, will be a step towards the creation of an archive of freedom from a heavily burdened past.

Pain knows no colour or race. I think it's important we talk about this sort of stuff. For starters, let's just talk about it. (Ex-conscript interview, December 2015)

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