



Published in final edited form as:

Med Anthropol Q. 2012 March ; 26(1): 49–68.

Armor and Anesthesia:

Exposure, Feeling, and the Soldier's Body

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Abstract

For many civilians, the high-tech weapons, armor, and military medicine with which U.S. soldiers are equipped present an image of lethal capacity and physical invulnerability. But, as this article explores, soldiers themselves just as often associate the life-sustaining technology of modern warfare with feelings that range from a pragmatic ambivalence about exposure to harm all the way to profoundly unsettling vulnerability. This article, based on fieldwork among soldiers and military families at the U.S. Army's Ft. Hood, examines sensory and affective dimensions of soldiers' intimate bodily relationships with the technologies that alternately or even simultaneously keep them alive and expose them to harm. I argue that modern military discipline and technology conspire to cultivate soldiers as highly durable, capable, unfeeling, interchangeable bodies, or what might be called, after Susan Buck-Morss (1992), anesthetic subjects. But for soldiers themselves, their training, combat environment, protective gear, and weapons are a rich font of both emotional and bodily feeling that exists in complex tension with the also deeply felt military imperative to carry on in the face of extreme discomfort and danger.

Keywords

Iraq War; U.S. military; armor; biopolitics; embodiment; the senses

A whole range of technologies, from weapons and armor to battlefield medicine, extend U.S. soldiers' capacity for violence and enhance their ability to withstand it. In military logic as well as the civilian imagination, these technologies work in concert with discipline and training to produce soldiers as subjects who, thanks to their insensitivity to pain and their immunity from danger, can reliably be sent to face bullets, bombs, and the other attendant threats of a war zone. For so many of the soldiers I spent time with at and around the U.S. Army's Ft. Hood in central Texas, however, the vulnerability that came with being deployed in harm's way was an abiding preoccupation. Soldiers' talk about and experience of armor and other protective technologies mediated this sense of exposure and materialized the complex feelings that come with the difficult and dangerous labor of war making.

In this article I relate a series of anecdotes and cases from the words and experiences of individual soldiers. With this approach I aim to convey both the complex breadth of form of soldiers' feelings of vulnerability and the depth of its penetration into the routine experience of war making. Throughout these vignettes, soldiers' narratives and actions suggest that their embodied experience is profoundly shaped by armor and related technologies. I argue that this shaping reflects both a long-term genealogy of modern warfare and the current specific conditions of counterinsurgency war in Iraq. By attending to the historical-material conditions of war's production, the highly organized regimes of power to which soldiers are subjected, and the phenomenology of sense-perception and embodied experience, I theorize

this embodied state as a complex interrelationship of bodily discipline and protection, on the one hand, and brutal exposure to discomfort and harm, on the other hand, which I gloss as *anesthesia*. I then unpack various dimensions of this dynamic as they arose in the talk of different soldiers: generalized anxieties and suspicions surrounding protective gear; the banal phenomenology of grinding military labor; the tactile relationship between wounded bodies and wounding objects; and the highly specific ways that the geography and technology of counterinsurgency warfare expose soldiers' bodies to harm. I conclude by locating this portrait of vulnerable, instrumentalized bodies within a broader context of civilian perceptions of soldiers, military technology, and the violent bodily consequences of violent U.S. foreign policy. Both technologically mediated soldierly embodiment and technologically mediated civilian perceptions of war, I argue, are characterized by forms of anesthesia that circumscribe much of the bodily experience of war violence.

Ft. Hood and the Iraq War

In 2007–08, I conducted 12 months of fieldwork with soldiers, veterans and military family, and community members at and around the U.S. Army's Fort Hood in central Texas. The data in this article come from interviews, informal conversations, and extensive participant-observation with soldiers based there. Some of these encounters took place at a civilian volunteer soldier support organization located on the base where I worked as a volunteer and was invited to do research, a which I refer to here as the Foundation, and others took place in soldiers' homes, bars, restaurants, and at public events.¹ Fort Hood is the largest military installation in the country, and home to approximately 50,000 soldiers. During my fieldwork, this included the troops of the 1st Cavalry and 4th Infantry Divisions,² the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, the 13th Sustainment Command, and numerous other brigade-sized and smaller units,³ many of which have rotated through three, four, or more deployments to Iraq over the course of the war.⁴ Ft. Hood is also one of the most active U.S. bases, the point of departure and return for fully ten percent of all U.S. forces deployed overseas.

The massive military force at Ft. Hood is composed of soldiers trained to perform a broad range of functions, a diversity that reflects the scope and scale of the massive U.S. presence in Iraq and the complexity of its overlapping strategic, security, political, and humanitarian goals. In addition to the infantrymen, tank and armored vehicle drivers, artillery operators, military police, and helicopter crews and pilots, there are mechanics, truck drivers, communication specialists, engineers who build roads and bridges, civil affairs units that interact with the local population, medics and doctors and nurses, and cooks and clerks and a whole further host of logistical personnel, all of whom are crucial to the function of the military machine. These different roles expose soldiers to the potential for violence in different ways: a mechanic or a cook may never leave their Forward Operating Base (FOB), although an infantryman or a cavalry scout might head out on multiple patrols a day. However, the combination of military and humanitarian objectives in Iraq has earned it an

¹I recruited many subjects through this organization and reached others through contacts in the area around the base and subsequent snowball sampling. All soldiers quoted in this work spoke as private individuals, not as representatives of their chain of command or of the U.S. Army in general. All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Certain identifying details have been altered to ensure confidentiality.

²As of this writing, the 4th Infantry has now been mostly relocated to Ft. Carson in Colorado and replaced at Ft. Hood by the 1st Armored Division.

³A division is the largest deployable formation in the U.S. Army. It is commanded by a general and consists of 10,000 to 15,000 troops divided into brigades of 3,000 to 5,000 troops each. Under a doctrinal shift spearheaded by Donald Rumsfeld toward smaller and more flexible forces, combat brigades are increasingly self-contained and soldiers are deployed on a brigade, rather than a division, basis.

⁴Most combat brigades in 1st Cav and 4ID have rotated through three or more deployments to Iraq. The 96th Transportation Company, stationed at Ft. Hood, was the most deployed unit in the entire U.S. military in 2008, when they departed for their sixth tour in as many years.

apt description, not unlike the Vietnam War, as a war with “no front lines.” Even on a FOB, soldiers may be vulnerable to mortar, rocket, sniper, and suicide bomb attacks. A mechanic might head out into hostile territory to recover a disabled vehicle, and a cook might serve as a turret gunner as his unit convoys from one base to another. Indeed, as I examine in greater depth below, the occupation of Iraq requires tremendous effort simply moving people and materials safely from place to place, making targets of the road and the soldiers on it, whether those soldiers are hunting insurgents or hauling truckloads of food, fuel, or water.

The soldiers whose stories I relate here are representative of the eclectic group I came to know in my research. Although their jobs spanned a range of combat and noncombat Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs), they all faced at least the possibility of considerable danger and vulnerability simply by the general nature of the work of soldiering and the particular conditions obtaining in Iraq. Some were young and relatively inexperienced, and some were career soldiers. Some were active duty soldiers and some were Reservists and National Guardsmen.⁵ Many had seen combat, although some had not, and others had not deployed at all. Some had officially diagnosed injuries and some did not, and some of these injuries were from improvised explosive devices (IEDs—the preferred term for roadside bombs), mortars, or enemy fire while others were from accidents or overuse. Many of the accounts below come from cavalry scouts, whose work of armed reconnaissance entails exceptionally high levels of both aggression and exposure; others come from infantry soldiers, tankers, truck drivers, engineers, and medical personnel.⁶

Armor and Its Discontents

The conventional image of the U.S. soldier at war today is of a lethal and heavily armored agent of violence: rugged boots, torso bulked out by body armor and a harness laden with ammo and equipment, and a face hidden by black wraparound ballistic sunglasses and recessed behind an armor collar and the rim of a Kevlar helmet. Soldiers travel around Iraq in armored vehicles: up-armored Humvees; tanklike Bradley and Stryker fighting vehicles; and mine-resistant, ambush-protected trucks (MRAPs), newly designed for the specific conditions of counterinsurgency warfare in Iraq with extra armor and V-shaped undersides that deflect the force of IED explosions. Soldiers sleep in forward operating bases (FOBs) protected by massive barriers of concrete and concertina wire and tiers of earth-filled, steel mesh baskets called hescos. Their trucks are mounted with .50 caliber machine guns and MK 19 grenade launchers, and a quick squeeze of the trigger can rip a human body in half or level a building. New protective and medical technologies have made previously fatal traumatic wounds survivable. Armor plating and Kevlar helmets and fireproof Nomex coveralls, along with the U.S. Army’s cutting-edge trauma medicine, keep soldiers alive through concussion and fire and flying metal. One historically minded soldier acquaintance remarked to me that the U.S. death toll in Iraq (then around 3,200) was little more than “a bad week in Vietnam.”

To the outside observer, weapons and armor signify soldiers’ invulnerability and lethal capacity. But for soldiers these objects are material, bodily environments through which they understand their *vulnerability* to violence just as much as their ability to produce and withstand it. The soldiers I spent time with remarked constantly on the technology they depended on, and this talk often conveyed a strong sense of precariousness alongside the almost magical invincibility afforded by the body armor, high-tech sensors, life-saving

⁵U.S. Reserve and U.S. National Guard Personnel make up approximately half of the total manpower of the U.S. Army, although they have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan in much higher proportions than was the case in previous wars.

⁶My ethnographic sample is loosely representative of U.S. Army demographics in general: the Army is largely white, although blacks and Latinos are represented in higher proportion than in the U.S. population at large, and it skews heavily male, especially among soldiers in combat MOSs that do not admit women.

medicine, and military training aimed at preserving life in life-threatening conditions. I would often learn from my informants about the thickness of the ceramic small arms protective insert (SAPI) plate in a soldier's vest or the number of layers of armor surrounding the passenger compartment of a patrol vehicle or the ceramic-steel composition of the front slope of the Abrams tank through a story of how it had been pierced by shrapnel, or ripped apart by an IED blast, or failed to stop a sniper's bullet.

There is a mental burden to armor that extends beyond the discomfort of its 33 bulky pounds that must be borne by the body for days, weeks, and months at a time. This burden consists of soldiers' own knowledge—some of it technical, some of it experiential, some of it secondhand—about the true limitations of the technology meant to protect them and the true lethality of the weapons used against them. A lot of talk I heard from soldiers about their gear had to do with its actual or possible or anticipated failure to protect them. Body armor, Kevlar, the plating on the Humvees, and the U.S. military's formidable bomb detection and electronic countermeasures often existed, in soldiers' talk, in relation to insurgents' armor-piercing bullets and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) and the artillery shells and shaped charges from which IEDs are fashioned.

It is not even necessary to have been in the war zone to feel this burden of potential violence. Neither Frank, a serious-minded truck driver with an intense, narrow gaze, nor Petey, a goofy but physically imposing infantryman, had deployed. Both suffered from repetitive strain injuries that would have to heal before they could be sent over. But that did not stop them from trading a series of authoritative tidbits about the relative merits and limitations of the U.S. Army's body armor one day as I sat with them on the porch of the Foundation building. The armor is known colloquially as IBA or an I-vest, after its trade name, Interceptor Body Armor. Sure, they said, it would protect you from 7.62 mm AK-47 rounds at range. But not necessarily a 9-millimeter up close, even though the fabric alone was supposed to—there had been news stories about that, about the plates giving way—and definitely not a .45 or an armor-piercing round. And what about knives? As for wearing your vest inside the FOB while you were working or going about your business, what you had to worry about in there were mortars, and if one hit near you, well, there was only so much the vest could do for you. Even then, there were all those parts of you that weren't covered.

The tone with which Frank and Petey passed these secondhand facts back and forth suggested that they regarded them as mildly sensational, a hint of suspicion and anxiety that exceeded mere technical claims about the armor. Soldiers are told to wear the I-vest to protect themselves, but what exactly its supposed capacities are and whether it will live up to them is unclear. Underneath the government's armor and the enemy's bullets, it's soldiers' own flesh on the line, and some actuarial calculation has been made about how much pain and damage their bodies can be expected to endure. Even though Frank and Petey were sitting safely on a porch in Texas, months away from being deployed, all this talk about the chinks in the armor helped give shape and logic to the threat that lay over the horizon. They had far more immediate problems that they talked about all the time: anxious wives, cars to fix, bills and debts, grinding pains in their joints, and heavy-handed bosses who didn't treat them right. But the talk about armor made it clear that even there on the porch, they were already exposed, already living the embodied ambiguity of being trained and equipped for invincibility, on the one hand, and the anxiety of vulnerability, on the other hand. What soldiers say with their fearful or descriptive or playful talk is an articulation of this ambiguous, vulnerable position.

What I demonstrate here is that soldiers' relationship to armor is not simply a matter of what they know about it, but how it provokes them to *feel* about the vulnerable disposition of their bodies. The question is not whether armor does or doesn't work, because the armor *does*

work. Ballistic glasses protect your eyes, vests stop bullets and shrapnel, and an armored Humvee can weather an IED with nothing but a flat tire—sometimes. So for the soldiers I spent time with, armor’s promise of protection conjures feelings not just of security and invincibility, but of uncertainty, resentment, and simple curiosity. BJ, who was in his early twenties, had done a tour as a scout in Iraq and was on the cusp of being promoted from Specialist to Sergeant when he began the process of medical separation because of a back injury. He was equal parts earnestly curious and darkly cynical, and in typical fashion he related to me how he and some buddies had abused a bunch of their equipment to see what would happen to it. They shot up the SAPI plates, he told me and a roomful of other soldiers at the Foundation one day. The bullets barely left a scratch, though. They tried to set the Nomex on fire too, and not much happened. One of them modified his gas mask so that he could smoke marijuana through it. Turning these technologies inside out, BJ and his friends subjected them to the forces they were supposed to withstand to see if they really could handle it: shoot what is bulletproof, burn what is fireproof, fill with poisonous vapors the thing meant to purify your air. But they also turned their hostility toward the technology that, for better or for worse, made it possible for their bodies to be exposed to bullets, fire, fumes.⁷

Soldiers now survive violence that in previous wars would have been fatal, but they survive potentially to confront unprecedented conditions that, as physician Ronald Glasser has extensively documented, are distinct in kind and scale to the Iraq War (2006). They include burns, blindness, and missing limbs; damage to whiplashed joints and limbs that is difficult to diagnose and treat; the psychic shock of being the only one left alive of a crew of four or six or more; and perhaps most pernicious of all, traumatic brain injury (TBI), the symptoms of which are oblique, complex, and debilitating, but often unmarked by physical pathology. These implications are well known by soldiers, and some whom I knew remarked on or recounted to me stories of comrades who came back from war debilitated, maimed, made “crazy” or “retarded” by trauma or brain injury, or sexually crippled by genital injuries. As Atul Gawande noted in 2004, quite early in the war, fatality rates are only a “weak proxy” for the actual level of violence and destruction to which soldiers’ bodies are exposed (2004:2471). Glasser puts it even more starkly: “death in Iraq is no longer the measure of risk” (Glasser 2006:43). In addition to counting dead or broken bodies, we might do well also to consider lived experiences of vulnerability.

What then is to be made of the profound ambivalence illustrated by Petey’s and Frank’s and BJ’s stories? The entailments of this violence—structured by specific features and technologies of the current war—are attested to by a burgeoning and vibrant body of ethnographic, journalistic, and documentary accounts probing the lives of severely injured soldiers.⁸ As many of these accounts show, and as the work of my cocontributors here in this volume and elsewhere demonstrates (Messinger 2009, 2010; Wool 2010), a simple tally of diagnosed severe injury is itself only a “weak proxy” for the complexity of living, as soldiers do, in and with bodies that are both the instruments and the objects of violence. This is a much broader field of experience that is continuous with injury and death but is neither reducible to nor separable from them: the routine exposure to harm to which *all* soldiers are subject simply as a feature of their work, an exposure powerfully mediated by technology.

⁷Such informal “experiments” resonate with the long history of experimentation in which soldiers’ bodies have served as both means and end for testing the limits of human biology (Agamben 1998; Uhl and Ensign 1980).

⁸See, among many others, Aaron Glantz’s *The War Comes Home* (2010), David Finkel’s *The Good Soldiers* (2009), Ellen Spiro and Phil Donahue’s *Body of War* (2007), and Richard Hankin’s *Home Front* (2006).

The Soldier Body and the Senses

In this analysis I take as axiomatic Walter Benjamin's observation that the technological "progress" of modern warfare—the development of ever more advanced armor, weapons, and tactics—does not simply ensure the increased protection of the human body, but also subjects it to previously unimaginable forms of harm and exposure, levels of violence that confound past experience and present description. In the wake of World War I, Benjamin noted the profound transformation wrought by the emergence of modern artillery, air power, armored tanks, chemical weapons, and other novel entailments of high-tech war fighting. "Never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than ... bodily experience by mechanical warfare," he wrote. "A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body" (Benjamin 1986).

To various well-established anthropological analyses of human practices of violence (Ehrenreich 1997; Nordstrom 1997; Riches 1986; Simons 1999), a reading of Benjamin thus adds the notion that the intensive technologization of war making constituted an epochal shift in which human experience found itself radically "contradicted" and powerfully shaped by the literal "machinery" of war. It is this generative contradiction that is manifest in Petey's, Frank's, and BJ's uneasy meditations and curious experiments on their gear. The experience of war and its impacts on bodies are not unwavering constants, as observers like Glasser and Gawande point out. In an echo of Benjamin, military historian John Keegan notes that it was the beginning of the 20th century that saw the rise of "'thing-killing' as opposed to man-killing weapons"—antitank mines, armor-piercing and explosive munitions—that "invalidated the restraints" of previously agreed-upon rules of war (Keegan 1978:329–330; see also Asad 1996:298). Since then, these new killing technologies have not only directly subjected soldier bodies to intensified destructive force but also served more generally to organize the tactical and strategic conditions in which soldiers are variously exposed to and preserved against harm (Glasser 2006). From a medical anthropological perspective, we can treat war as strongly determined by such material and cultural circumstances. It is a "real, sensuous activity" (Marx 1972) shaped by the historical and material conditions of its production and "culturally constituted" via embodied human practice and experience (Csordas 1993:140; Kleinman et al. 1997). Contemporary soldiers' embodied experience bears the imprint of both the genealogy of modern warfare and the specific tactical and technological conditions of counterinsurgency war in Iraq.

The human body is arguably the most taken for granted and the most essential piece of equipment of the day-to-day labors of war making. Although recent prominent critiques of U.S. war violence have emphasized the technologically facilitated withdrawal of U.S. bodies from combat zones in favor of air strikes, smart bombs, media spectacle, and remotely piloted drones (Baudrillard 1995; Feldman 1994; Singer 2009; Virilio 1989), the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could not carry on without the physical presence of tens of thousands of such bodies. To get at the conditions and the experiences of war making, I theorize the soldier body as simultaneously a sensate, feeling organism and an abstract object produced by systems of discipline and regulation.

The military body is not just a "tool of man," to use Marcel Mauss's words (Mauss 2006). It also represents the transformation of men and women into tools. It is a body instrumentalized via discipline and control. Although it may seem obvious now, it was not until the mid-18th century that the training of soldiers was made technical, systematic, and bureaucratic (Huntington 1957) through the use of modern techniques of discipline that, as Michel Foucault writes, render the human body a "docile" object from which a soldier can

be produced (Foucault 1979). A modern soldier in this sense is an interchangeable, uniform bodily subject that, thanks to drill, training, and relentless routine and sanction, can show up for work, complete physical training (PT) exercises, shoot weapons, carry heavy loads, perform monotonous, repetitive tasks, comply with orders, stand guard, spot enemies, endure heat, cold, and sleeplessness, stand at attention, occupy a place in formation, fill a uniform. The body is the site of the training and capacities that make the modern professional soldier competent and effective (Huntington 1957:75). And although much is made of soldiers' willingness to give their lives, the exposure of their bodies has as much to do with calculated tactical decisions as it does with culturally valorized notions of service and sacrifice (cf. MacLeish 2009, 2010). Thus, in addition to being shaped and compelled by disciplinary power and deputized by the state's sovereign power to kill enemies, soldiers' bodies are subject to *biopower*: protective, medical, and therapeutic technologies that intervene at the level of biology to marshal soldier bodies as manipulable "resources" that can be kept alive and allowed to die (Agamben 1998; Bickford 2008:6; Foucault 1988).

These regimes of power that make soldiers useful instruments and meaningful currency in contests of state violence give rise to a profound bodily alienation. The soldier is "sealed off from experience," trained not to feel even as he is trained to deploy his body and his sense perception in highly specific and productive ways (Benjamin as quoted in Buck-Morss 1992:17). Soldiers are, in Buck-Morss's words, *anesthetic subjects* whose effectiveness derives specifically from their ability to ignore pain and discomfort and to make themselves "impervious to ... sense-giving information of danger" (1992:9). By suggesting an image of a perfectly empowered, perfectly protected, perfectly fearless actor—the sort of popular image of the armored soldier described a few pages above—armor, weapons, and training leave soldiers "divorced from sensory vulnerability" (Buck-Morss 1992:32), "sealed off" from their very being as vulnerable, sensate human bodies, bodies that can be harmed and killed.

As Buck-Morss also suggests, however, all sorts of inassimilable sensory impressions inevitably stick around the margins of this carefully managed subject formation. Technology, discipline, and corporate culture can facilitate the suppression and mastery of the senses, but they cannot banish them from bodily life altogether. Discipline and anesthesia are not *faits accomplis*, but, rather, processes that must act continuously on the malleable and lively matter of the body and what Nadia Seremetakis calls its "involuntary and pervasive material experience" (1996:20). In the case of soldiers, that "involuntary" character of embodied experience is especially literal: subjection to orders means taking on the mastery of one's own potentially rebellious body—means, that is, working constantly at a kind of anesthesia. The state that results, however, is not the absence of feeling, but ambivalent, complex feelings that persist amid soldiers' efforts to ignore, accommodate, or master them.

Heat and Weight: The Feeling of Being There

People don't know how it feels to be there, soldiers would tell me. They meant physically, on your body: the grinding physical burden of simply being in Iraq moving around. Long hours of demanding work—fighting, driving, patrolling, building—are aggravated by the relentless heat, routinely over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and the mass of body armor and other gear. Stan, a former cavalry scout who retired as a senior NCO after more than 20 years of service, told me one such account. He had been in charge of logistics for an entire combat battalion, building a patch of bare, dangerous desert near the Iranian border into a functioning home base for several hundred soldiers. During deployment there are a lot of bad times, he told me, but even the good is shaded by the fact that everyone is simply "miserable for long periods of time." This sensory everydayness, lodged deeply in the

privacy of individual experience, elides easy representational framing, and the soldiers know this. They know that it is hard for others to understand even as they know it themselves without having to think about it at all. It is the kind of knowing that Michael Taussig calls *tactility*, “an embodied and somewhat automatic ‘knowledge’ that functions like peripheral vision, not studied contemplation” (Taussig 1992:141).

The obvious practical effect of the heat is sweat and the moldering of the body’s drenched and suffocated corners and crevices. The rasping friction of the strapped and swaddled and loaded body’s own mechanical action on itself: in the armpits, between the toes, in the crotch and the cleft of the ass, in the scalp, on the shoulders or the lower back or the waistband or any other place that the gear presses fabric against skin with no room to breathe appeared over and over again in soldiers’ descriptions of deployed life. They described foot fungus, blisters, sores, rashes, insect bites that festered for days. I heard this litany too in an Army doctor’s precautionary predeployment hygiene lecture to a couple hundred women National Guard soldiers a few weeks away from departing. You need foot powder, baby wipes, sunscreen, clean socks, and underwear, she reminded them. Between every line she admonished, “It’s the desert! It’s hot!” The soldiers, many of whom were deploying for the first time, laughed—of course they knew the desert was hot. But what does this heat mean for your body, after a week, a month, a year of such abuse?

Heat entails the related and equally simple necessity of consuming water, which itself entails its own assaults on comfort, health, and personal safety. For soldiers out on long patrols or convoys or stuck at observations posts (OPs), the only water available for days might be the temperature of a warm bath, letting the heat into your body instead of providing cool refreshment. Sometimes the water itself had hidden properties that could hurt you: “the water they make over there—it has all those minerals in it.” The infantry soldier who told me this had gotten kidney stones from desalinated water in Iraq and was in the field for a couple of painful months before he could get treatment. Of course they warn soldiers about this. But you can’t not drink it. Drinking water also means having to urinate, exposing yourself to IEDs, to attack, to the gaze of your fellow soldiers. Privacy is impossible, especially for women soldiers, who have to squat between truck tires or behind the door of a Humvee while on convoy duty. The line between what is harming and wearing out the thirsty, chapped body, on the one hand, and what is keeping it alive, on the other hand, blurs and folds in on itself.

Heat renders you passive, because “you just sit there, you can’t do shit about it,” Ernie told me. Ernie was a senior NCO who led an infantry platoon through dozens of patrols and firefights in Baquba, in Diyala Province, in the middle of the 2006 troop surge. Heat, Ernie seemed to suggest, reduces you to a decidedly unsoldierly posture, a direct challenge to the cool indifference of anesthesia. It’s not what you’re there for. Mastery of the environment, sense of purpose, the ability to deny pain and deny the intrusion of the senses, all come under threat with the assault of heat. Heat’s oppressiveness seeps into you from the physical environment. Someone very far away, someone who himself doesn’t have to go, has cursed the soldier’s body with the madness of going out in the heat. The soldier’s orders make no accommodation for the angle of the sun, and he sweats and chafes under the imposed madness of a higher logic.

Weight is similar to heat in its invisibility but also in its compelled, involuntary character. The helmet and I-vest give the soldier superhuman proportions—a massive, powerful-looking torso and a bulbous head. The harness slung with gear and pouches, the bulging pockets, the M4 carbine in hand all suggest preparedness and enhanced capacity. But the I-vest weighs 33 pounds. The rest of the gear can easily be another 30, so the soldier labors in the oven heat under 63 pounds of dead weight. This is like a bag of concrete mix on your

back and chest, or a ten-year-old child riding on your shoulders, all the time, while you run around trying not to get killed. It slows you down, limits your range of motion, making you, paradoxically, more exposed. I once heard a young soldier at the Foundation and a visiting Vietnam vet compare the relative drawbacks of the cumbersome IBA and the lighter and far less effective flack jackets worn in Vietnam; the soldier bemoaned the lack of mobility and the veteran the lack of protection.

Like heat, the weight is inescapable and involuntary. Like the heat, it wears a person out, intruding on health, comfort, and safety and bearing down on the body as it marches, crawls, drives, and shoots in training and in combat under a 60- or 80- or 100-pound load. Advocates for the injured told me numerous times about what they saw as the absurdly high rate of degenerative disk diagnoses among soldiers no older than 22. Debby claimed to have seen many cases in which Army doctors diagnosed duty-related back injuries as preexisting conditions and discharged young, hurt soldiers without compensation. The burden of armor is constant and exhausting. In many places, soldiers had to wear their I-vests all the time: out on patrol, but also driving a truck or even in the relative safety of the FOB or command post (CP). Especially in the Guard and Reserves, some soldiers ended up with “hand-me-down gear,” older, heavier, and ill fitting. One soldier I met had a debilitating shoulder injury from this, sitting in a too-big vest while driving convoys that lasted a day or two or more, one after the other, the axillary plate in his armpit and the collar around his neck working on his shoulder until his arm was almost immobilized with pain.

What saves the body is wrapped up with what harms it. Even barring serious injury, weight means that you come back worn out, your body aching and abused. Kelly, a junior enlisted engineer who spent her deployment building bridges in western Iraq, often under the threat of mortar and sniper attacks, echoed Stan’s emphasis on simple physical misery: “A lot of people don’t realize the toll that a deployment takes on you. Like physically, yeah: everybody gets hurt, everybody feels like shit, they’re tired.” Again, we all know exhaustion. But what do weeks of exhaustion do to you, or 12 months, or 15?

Traveling along the “involuntary dimension” of the senses (Seremetakis 1996), heat and weight are subjection that you know you’re being subjected to. The physical miseries of heat and weight, which seem to end at the boundaries of the body, reflect the soldier’s utter *lack* of autonomy over or privacy in his own body. They say that “the Army owns your body,” but in fact although the U.S. Army owns the body’s capacities and labor and potentials, soldiers are forced to own its pains and breakdowns and its simple exhaustion. Soldiers are subjected to heat and weight as a mass, by orders and protocols. But they are then made accountable for them as individuals: drink water, wear your vest and Kevlar, change your socks, don’t complain, don’t get hurt. The soldier’s senses remain his property even if his body does not, and those senses are open—inevitably *too* open—to the harsh world the soldier finds himself in. What heat and weight reveal is the fraying, nervous edge where anesthesia has not fully taken hold, where it is challenged by ungovernable sensory impingements and must be reasserted by discipline.

The Shrapnel in Bullard’s Pocket

Things like armor vests that seem to just be riding on soldiers’ bodies still find their way in, making their mark on the glands, the joints, the bones. But other penetrations of the body are even more dramatic.

Bullard was a scout, trained to conduct armed reconnaissance in small groups near or even behind enemy lines. He is in his early twenties but, like a lot of young soldiers I met, looks and seems a little older, and he speaks in a slow central Texan drawl. He is wide, carrying extra weight that came with the immobilization of serious injury, but he still moves with

purpose and awareness. He sports dark, bugeyed Oakleys all the time, against the light sensitivity that is a common symptom of TBI. The first time I met him he told me he was building a shadow box. They're popular with soldiers, and you see them a lot in their homes and offices, full of badges, medals, coins, and banners. But this was for something different. The medics and doctors had saved the plate from the vest Bullard was wearing when he got blown up by an IED. A piece of shrapnel had gouged through it and was stopped by the layer of Kevlar fabric underneath. He showed me with a thumb and forefinger pinching a sliver of air how far it had gone through the ceramic slab that was protecting his chest, how close it had come to entering his body. Later, when he told me more of the story, he showed me where other pieces of shrapnel had pierced unarmored places on his face and arm. The metal was still in him and he sometimes snagged his shirt getting dressed. He handed me a tiny piece of metal that he carried around in his pocket: smooth, glossy, almost black, less than three quarters of an inch long, a squared-off rod gently rounded at one end, cut at an odd angle at the other. That was the bit that almost got him, that they pulled out of the lining of his vest. It was an uncanny thing, not particularly heavy or sharp, and its carbon sheen didn't look like any familiar metal, as if the same rush of heat and velocity and friction that had turned it from inert junk into a deadly projectile had also physically transformed it. He always carries it. "I used to complain about wearing gear," he said, "but no more." He has these two reminders to touch and to look at: the thing that almost killed him and the thing that barely kept him alive. They both did their job, the latter edging out the former only slightly.

There is a palpable, even tactile uncanniness to the intimate relationship of flesh and metal that soldiers live. The two substances are so unlike, one warm and vital and yielding, the other hard and inert and cool. Their interrelation is ambivalent: the flesh is flesh that is vulnerable but that has also been turned into a weapon, while the metal is metal that destroys and incinerates but that also shields and protects. The shrapnel in Bullard's pocket and inside his body and the lesions on his brain from the concussion of the bomb blast that the doctors have told him on the basis of neurologic evidence are there but that elude detection by MRI and CT scan all testify in a very literal way to the persistence of objects "within persons" (Seremetakis 1996:2). They are the bodily imprint of the longer history of soldiers' interface with the unforgiving matter of weapons and armor as well as the recent history of counterinsurgency war in Iraq.

Bullard's souvenir piece of shrapnel goes with the gouged chest plate that let it get close to him, but not too close; and his story of survival and grievous injury goes with the story of the other soldiers in his vehicle when the bomb hit: all of them were killed. This is the uneasy obverse of the invincible-looking armed and equipped figure of the soldier invoked at the beginning of this article.

Movement to Contact

The scouts I met—Bullard, BJ, Stan, and others—called themselves, with no small amount of pride, "bullet catchers" and described many of their missions as "driving around waiting to get shot at." They were referring to what the U.S. Army field manual on tactics dubs "movement to contact": finding the enemy, making "initial contact with the smallest force possible, consistent with protecting the force," avoiding "decisive engagement," and maintaining "maximum flexibility" (Headquarters, Department of the Army 2001:ch. 4). Movement to contact is a deliberate exercise in vulnerability, a fact implicitly acknowledged by the field manual's dry recommendation to limit the size of the engaging force—the scouts—to an expendable quantity to "protect" the main force. Scouts are trained to operate aggressively, undetected, and in small numbers near or behind enemy lines. But the task of movement to contact is not just to survive to be able to find, survey, and kill the enemy. It is

also, implicitly, for soldiers to put their own bodies on the line, to offer themselves up as targets. The veneer of careful tactical reasoning is undermined by this morbid mingling of means and ends that plays out in decisions over how much exposure is worth risking in the pursuit of a larger objective. Scouts set out to “catch bullets” on purpose.

Drawing out the enemy with aggressive patrolling and reconnoitering is not a new tactic. U.S. soldiers in Vietnam also faced an irregular enemy force, a war with “no front lines, and the problem of vulnerable supply lines. But conditions in Iraq are further complicated by the combination of conventional combat, including armed patrols, armored vehicles, and air strikes, with “security” (the maintenance of safety and order), “force protection” (the security of the armed force itself), and the reconstruction of physical and governmental infrastructure. In what may be the most galling and unnerving vulnerability of them all, easy targets are everywhere, as are the weapons that can destroy them, and the enemy is nowhere. Like the technologically extended soldier’s body that becomes vulnerable in new ways even as its capacities are enhanced, the occupying military force needs a massive sustainment apparatus to supply, shelter, feed, maintain, and equip its “kinetic” operations at the same time as its corresponding logistical and reconstruction tasks demand a massive amount of security if they are to carry on. Indeed, it is arguably only because of improved armor and combat medicine that this style of occupation is possible in the face of so much violent resistance. Numerous journalistic and autobiographical accounts mirror the words of my informants in testifying that even moving supplies and people across the landscape is essentially a tactical operation, requiring armored vehicles, armed escorts, and extensive planning.⁹ And in the insurgent–counterinsurgent geography of Iraq, all soldiers become “bullet catchers.” Engineers, logistical personnel, and truck drivers all expose themselves to attack just to accomplish the mundane support tasks—delivering fuel, food, and water, repairing roads and vehicles—on which combat operations depend. In this sense, the tactical practice of movement to contact becomes the default mode of anyone out on the road merely trying to get where they’re going in one piece, not least Iraqi civilians.

In spreading itself everywhere to control and reconstruct the landscape, the occupying force offers a vast plethora of targets to insurgent fighters. The kinds of targets that the occupiers present are ostensibly manifold—vehicles, buildings, installations, roads, construction sites, and even intangibles like “security” itself. But these things are all made targets by the presence of soldiers’ bodies. Occupying space, the soldier becomes a vulnerable part of that “raw material of sovereignty” and its attendant bodily destruction (Mbembe 2003:26). Bullard said that right in the middle of their area of operations was a one-mile stretch of road that was constantly mined with IEDs. They had to drive up and down it all the time, not only to get places but merely to “clear” that portion of highly trafficked road, making it, in the process, an ever-easier target for insurgents who wanted to kill U.S. troops. He said it was stupid, wasting lives by sending people up and down the routes just to clear them. “Once you leave a spot, it’s no longer clear.”

The discourse of strategic warfare tends to regard injury—“collateral damage” done to noncombatants, but also harm to soldiers themselves—as something secondary to the true strategic objectives of war. But as Elaine Scarry points out, war is fundamentally a “contest of injuring” (Scarry 1987). War’s inevitable damage, according to Scarry, can’t be organized into a neat separation of means and ends. The injured are not “accidentally” in the way of objectives; *they are the means* of achieving objectives, and by extension, an objective in and of themselves (Scarry 1987:74). Whatever the intentions toward an individual target or the

⁹Tom Bissell’s “Improvised, Explosive, Divisive” provides a complete and critical portrait (Bissell 2006). See also the descriptions of conveying that appear throughout many Iraq War memoirs (e.g., Buzzell 2006; Fick 2006; Filkins 2009; Finkel 2009; Hedges and Al-Arian 2009; Mejia 2007; Williams 2005; Wright 2004).

objective of a particular mission might be, by its broader logic, war requires bodies to hurt. There are no side effects, no damage that is “collateral.” By this same logic, the deliberate exposure of soldiers’ bodies to harm is not a mere means to an end but is, rather, fundamental to the very tactics by which they control space.

Metal and Exposure

Given this vulnerability, there is a balance to be struck for soldiers entering the combat zone, a cultivated operational knowledge that comes in large part from firsthand experience, about what can hurt them and what can’t. If that knowledge isn’t mastered, or if it is demolished by trauma or chaotic circumstances, then the anxiety and terror of being utterly unprotected take over, despite or even because of the physical burden and technosuperior claims of armor. Intellectual knowledge of what the weapons and armor can do for you and do to you has to work in tandem with a kind of anesthetic habitus as well, an ability to both take in and ignore “sense-giving information of danger” and act on it without having to think too hard about it first. A soldier needs to know, when he hears a shot, is it passing close by? Is it accurate or random? Can he tell from the sound if it is of sufficient caliber to penetrate his vest, the window of his Humvee, the side of his tank? Will an RPG come straight toward him or will a bent fin loop it to one side?

Lacking this knowledge of how your own body fits among the competing vectors of force of the weapons and armor around you can render you ineffective as a soldier, and so, conversely, a certain resignation to your vulnerability will help keep you alive. Ernie put it bluntly: “If you go out there scared, you’ll make fuckin’ mistakes. But if you go out there and you know that there’s a chance, you’re not scared no more.” One day, Ernie agreed to take a young soldier who hadn’t spent much time outside the wire as his driver, and Ernie’s infantry platoon found itself charging into a firefight. Small-arms fire pinged against the side of their truck and the kid started to freak out. Ernie told him that the sound was just the engine cooling down, but still he was so scared that he couldn’t move his legs or unclamp his white-knuckled hands from the wheel. “All right,” said Ernie. “You’re no good no more.” It was important to understand the *dink dink dink* as the sound of the Humvee’s hardened steel and armored windows *stopping* enemy rounds. It was the sound of safety. But Ernie’s soldier didn’t know that; or if his brain knew it, his body didn’t. It hadn’t accustomed itself to the specifics of its enabled and vulnerable state.

Ernie’s story about this reassuring, metal-on-metal sound segued into a second tale: the insurgents began using armor-piercing, anti-materiel rounds, which the Geneva Convention outlaws for use against human targets and that are thus forbidden to U.S. and Coalition forces.¹⁰ These rounds sound like a sledgehammer hitting the side of the truck, Ernie said, and they just go right through. They are made with tungsten, much harder than the lead of a conventional bullet. Ernie pulled one out of his truck’s steel gunner’s shield and it wasn’t even bent. “And they’re using that against people, against soldiers.” Like Bullard with his souvenir SAPI plate and shrapnel fragment, Ernie’s juxtaposition of the gouged gunner’s shield and the tungsten core of the AP round is a dramatic illustration of thing-killing force with the vulnerable human body thrown into the mix: “they’re using that against people.” Although international law seeks increasingly to mitigate war’s impact on human bodies, exposure to “thing-killing” weapons indifferent to the distinction between people and things makes the soldier himself into a thing, a sort of back-projected, highly vulnerable extension

¹⁰The Hague Conventions and the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (a 1980 annex to the Geneva Conventions) restrict the use of small-caliber expanding, separating, fragmenting, and incendiary rounds against personnel (along with various other weapons), but the United States is not a signatory to the Hague Conventions and the Department of the Army routinely issues legal memoranda on its own interpretations of what these international conventions do and do not permit. See Alvermann and International Committee of the Red Cross 2005:1781–1782.

of the armor that the bullet or bomb is meant to pierce. Flesh becomes an extension of metal, rather than the other way around.

Several steps up the scale of destruction from an AP round is the explosively formed penetrator, the deadliest component used for roadside bombs in Iraq. An EFP is a round, open-topped canister packed with explosive and capped with a shallow dish of copper, steel or tantalum—dense metals with high melting points. It looks like a soup pot with the lid on upside down. The physics of detonation transforms this thin metal lid into a compact, white-hot, high-velocity slug. Armor can absorb or deflect bullets and fragments of shrapnel, but EFPs go right through layers and layers of it, in one side and out the other and through whatever is in between. They are for use against armor, which means their purpose in Iraq is to kill U.S. soldiers, for no one else there is surrounded by so much hardened metal. Extension and new vulnerability and new protection swarm and leapfrog past one another.

An EFP strike is a “catastrophic kill,” not the couple of casualties that a conventional IED will produce. The vehicle it hits is destroyed, the people inside often die. “Brother, there ain’t nothing in our inventory that’ll stop that thing,” Dime told me. Dime is a junior soldier in his early thirties—he enlisted late to get health insurance for his kids. He drove an Abrams tank for three separate tours in Iraq, of which he said, “You think you’re in a suit of armor, it’s a goddamn façade!” The narrow, bathtublike compartment where Dime sat is called the driver’s hole, and it lies beneath the tank’s formidable front slope, a massive slab of ceramic and depleted uranium composite. Dime lived through several EFP strikes; in one of them, he said he felt the penetrator slide past his legs after it cut through the tank’s hull. Everyone else in the tank was killed. When I met Dime, he was undergoing treatment for TBI, PTSD, and a host of complex orthopedic injuries occasioned by the intense, whiplashing compression of the blast waves from the explosions he had survived.

Metal that cuts through metal, the EFP totally destabilizes the armored form and turns it against itself and its fleshy, human contents. It fills the insides of a vehicle with the fractured bits of its own armor and structural members—this is called backspall, the armor that protects you becoming a cloud of shrapnel that will kill you. The penetrator ignites whatever will burn or explode, the bullets and rockets and grenades that you would turn against the enemy cooking off inside a confined space. It is a truly dire exposure, one that, by subjecting the soldier’s body to the unforgiving force of “thing-killing” weapons, reduces that body to a thing.¹¹ In the whole peculiar, technologically mediated state of vulnerability that soldiers find themselves in, apparently clear distinctions between who is doing the injuring, who is suffering it, what its goal is, and how final or effective it is against its victims all break down.

Discussion and Conclusion: Armor and Cultural Anesthesia

The rhetoric and the material logic of armor are of an impenetrable surface, a hermetic seal between inside and out. Armor clads and surrounds, protects and insulates a fragile, sensate body, extending that body and making it powerful and reflecting destructive force. “The armored, galvanized body” is a fantasy that “provides the illusion of invulnerability” (Buck-Morss 1992:40), holding out the promise of exerting military might without putting flesh and blood on the line. When pain and bodily vulnerability do erupt, they constitute a sort of “scandal” to modern liberal conceits (Asad 1996), a disruption of the idea that harm to soldiers’ bodies is always an accident or a sacrifice, rather than the result of deliberate calculation. Ever since the beginning of the war in Iraq, soldiers’ equipment and its

¹¹As I explore elsewhere, this often terrifying objectification is especially evident in soldiers’ talk about dead bodies so thoroughly disintegrated by explosions that they are not recognizable as human (MacLeish 2010:ch. 2).

limitations have been a point of fascination and debate for politicians and members of the civilian public. Stories abounded in the media of armor that was inadequate, slow to be delivered to troops, or supplied with military families' own hard-earned money.¹² But the people in charge of armies, as Glasser writes, are incredibly reluctant to advertise their failures (2006), and so even now, years later, the dilemmas posed by new armor, new weapons and new medicine have yet to emerge in full form in the official discourse. In the meantime, though, the promise or misapplication or insufficiency of these technologies indirectly reminded the public of what was already familiar to soldiers: the brute fact of human bodies being offered up to harm in ways shaped, managed, and mediated by technologies meant to protect those same bodies.

In this way, the anesthesia that military discipline and exigency demands of soldier bodies has a counterpart in the way that ambivalent soldierly embodiment is conveniently absent from public images of soldiers. This absence is what Allen Feldman calls *cultural anesthesia*, "the banishment of disconcerting, discordant and anarchic sensory presences and agents that undermine the normalizing and often silent premises of everyday life" (Feldman 1994:89). Some of the "normalizing" and "silent" assumptions here are that soldiers' protective gear completely insulates them from harm, and that harm that does befall them is the product of noble sacrifice and crafty enemies, rather than calculated decisions about the horrors soldiers are exposed to in the name of military necessity. Just as anesthesia leaves soldiers uneasily sealed off from their own bodily experience, cultural anesthesia leaves the rest of us sealed off from their fundamental condition of vulnerability.

What I have endeavored to show here is a way around the anesthesia of popular conceptions via soldiers' intimate, embodied, "involuntary" familiarity with their own vulnerability, a material experience directly linked to both general features of modern warfare and specific material aspects of counterinsurgency in Iraq. Soldiers' working and experiential knowledge of the capacities, limitations, and bodily feelings of weapons and armor is essentially a metric for thinking about the vulnerability of the "fragile human body" and the "fields of force" it is exposed to. Invincibility and vulnerability are not pure states, but signposts around which this experience is organized. This is what Petey and Frank were meditating on as they sat on the porch worrying about their I-vests, what BJ was rather aggressively responding to when he shot up his own armor, what Stan located in the persistent miseries of heat and weight, and what Ernie described in the difference between the sounds of less and more deadly rounds hitting the side of a Humvee. The tension between invincibility and vulnerability is exemplified in the contrast between Bullard's embrace of the cumbersome gear that saved his life and Dime's dismissal of his tank's impenetrable armor as "a goddamn façade." Even for Bullard, who was far from unscathed, the barrier of invincibility was broken. The shrapnel still harbored in Bullard's flesh is testament to his mastery over violence but also his fundamental vulnerability to it.

Sometimes, in some circumstances, against some things, the armor protects, and other times it doesn't. The modern soldier has always hung on the horns of an essentially iatrogenic dilemma: even when he is not seriously injured or directly in harm's way, he suffers and is exposed in ways only possible because of the technology that protects him and keeps him alive. Conventional ways of understanding harm take death and injury as their currency, but they leave aside the ambiguous and much more sustained condition of simply being *available* to be burdened, injured, or killed. This is the condition of being a resource, of being an instrumentalized military body that is weapon *and* a target at the same time. If a soldier can be killed or severely injured while aggressively patrolling the landscape or driving a tank—if his body can be broken by the thing protecting him as much as by the

¹²See, for example, Moss 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Banerjee and Kifner 2004; Schmitt 2004; and Kurzman 2007.

thing trying to kill him—his dramatic empowerment and traumatic exposure are simultaneous, rather than opposite or incidental to one another. The culturally anaesthetized images by which the civilian public understands soldiers make it easy to disregard this deliberate exposure, endured by soldiers on behalf of civilians. The felt bodily impacts not captured by such images—the exhaustion, weight, anxiety, scars, and carefully managed attention—help show the fuller field of violence to which soldiers are exposed simply as a matter of course, an exposure in which we, the civilian public, are necessarily complicit.

Acknowledgments

Fieldwork for this research was made possible by the generous support of the National Science Foundation, and write-up was supported by the University of Texas at Austin and a National Institute of Mental Health traineeship at the Rutgers University Institute for Health, Health Care Policy, and Aging Research. This article has benefited from the provocations, feedback, close reading, and support of many colleagues and friends in its various incarnations. Thanks in particular to Can Aciksoz, John Hartigan, Mathangi Krishnamurthy, Emily Lynch, the NYU Science Studies and Ethnography workshop, Rachael Pomerantz, Katie Stewart, Kamala Visweswaran and my fellow UT Austin writing workshop participants, and Zoë Wool. I am grateful for the close editorial guidance of Seth Messinger and the editors of *MAQ* and the comments of the two anonymous reviewers.

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