Be Part of the Story: A popular geopolitics of war comics aesthetics and Royal Air Force recruitment

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an analysis of images associated with the British Royal Air Force's recent 'Be Part of the Story' war comic-styled military recruiting campaign. Set around literatures in popular geopolitics, the paper builds on the concept of comic book visualities to suggest that the 'Be Part of the Story' images reproduce longstanding war comics conventions, and coherently represent the complex, relational and spatially disparate battlespaces of the present. The paper, firstly, provides a detailed history of war comics as they have mediated war to publics, and argues that war comics should figure more strongly in future studies of popular geopolitics. Secondly, it argues that more than simply part of a pervasive 'cultural condition' of militarization, military recruitment is a vital medium through which states and militaries view, and choose to represent their role in the world. Lastly, it demonstrates that 'Be Part of the Story' reproduces the violent visions, metaphors and cultural designations integral to state-centric narratives of global politics, and specifically, spatial principles inherent to network-centric warfare.

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Introduction

In the latter part of 2009, the British Royal Air Force (RAF) released a series of posters, magazine, TV, radio and cinema advertisements, blogs and online interactive content for a new recruiting campaign entitled 'Be Part of the Story' (hereafter BPotS). Designed to showcase "real experiences of RAF personnel to give the public an idea of the range of opportunities available within the RAF" (DLKWLowe, 2012: no pagination), BPotS explores RAF careers by focussing on the exploits of serving personnel and their role in UK Air-Sea Rescue, Air Traffic Control, and notably, combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

BPotS would come to be associated with a swathe of the RAF's ongoing publicity efforts (RAF, 2012), including 'offline' recruiting at airshows and public events. But the most visible element of the campaign has been a set of images reminiscent of boys-own, pocket-size, 'Pocket Library' war comics such as Commando (commandocomics.com, 2012), and the now defunct Air Ace and Action War Picture Library (Conroy, 2009; Riches, 2009). Present in publications like Men's Health magazine, the Sunday broadsheet Observer Magazine and on poster hoardings up and down the country, images such as Sean Langrish (Fig. 1), for instance, depict the realities of Aerospace Battle Management in Helmand Province,

Afghanistan, by setting photo-quality images and comics-grade illustrations of equipment, personnel and technology against an impressionistic and decidedly dramatic Afghan desert-scape of flames and combat. The heroic deeds of the RAF here — following war comic conventions (Huxley, 1990) — centre on comradeship and the overcoming adversity, superior know-how and technology as central to victory, and the sense that "the right war fought with the right weapons against the right enemy will enable us to be all that we can be" (Witek, 1996: 44).

BPotS also makes use of the aesthetic traditions of comic art which, in the case of Sean Langrish, lend coherency to a complex military-logistical narrative happening simultaneously across space and time (a narrative which would perhaps exceed the confines of a different medium). Overall, it is clear that even on initial inspection, the BPotS images use a comics aesthetic to "promote specific discourses by geopolitical actors" (Dittmer, 2007a: 248) (the RAF and British Ministry of Defence in this case) insofar as they mediate the political legitimacy of military violence and the structure of imagined geopolitical space. They are also explicit attempts to use the compelling drama of the professional Western warrior who, in being charged with securing the West's identity as a repository of virtue, requires as his (sic) backdrop barbaric and "dangerous spaces that need the heroic deeds of champions and defenders to keep…hazards at bay" (Dalby, 2008: 440).

The BPotS campaign is important for critical and popular geopolitics for three reasons. Firstly, whilst comics, comic art and

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Fig. 1. Sean Langrish.

cartoons have provided a staple source for scholars of popular geopolitics and critical IR (e.g. Diamond, 2002; Dodds, 2010; Manzo, 2012), the genre of dedicated war comics has received little attention to date (though see Holland, 2012). Where it has been aptly demonstrated that comics mediate politics, war and international conflict — principally via the work of Dittmer (2007a, 2007b) — there remains much to be said about how war comics represent spaces, places and peoples, how war comics might be said to legitimize imaginations of war and warfare, and around the representation of war *tout court* via comics aesthetics. The paper, in this respect, will demonstrate how war comics have been important, both historically and more recently, to the mediation of war and, therein, to the state's attempts at public relations and military recruitment.

Secondly, RAF and military recruiting are important because recruitment is a theme dealt with only obliquely in the literature.

Whilst a small number of scholars have asked of the persuasive and inspiring qualities of popular geopolitics (amongst them Ó Tuathail, 2005; Power, 2007), the broader trend in studies of popular, war-themed media is to consider recruitment "a generalized cultural condition" of an incipient Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (MIME-NET) (Der Derian, 2001; Stahl, 2010: 48). This overlooks the oftentimes less spectacular ways that militaries persuade and enrol their personnel, and the specificities of popular media produced by and for states and militaries for the purpose of recruitment. Moreover, where much of this literature focuses on the hyper-militarized state of popular culture in the US, there is little understanding of military public-relations strategies elsewhere. The paper addresses this oversight in part, and provides an analysis of the RAF's BPotS images as they evidence the British military's efforts to represent itself and its role in the world.