



Integration of the army into British society

G2S File No. 25

GDI (2S) Hervé BIZEUL

Published on 12/05/2020

L'Armée de Terre dans la société

To echo the question of the integration of the French army into our society, let us ask ourselves about the case of British soldiers within their own nation.

A well-integrated army

The British Army is highly valued and highly popular because the British are a people proud of their military history. Certainly in the first place because the army is the first institution bearing royalty. We talk about the Royal Navy, the Royal Air Force, the Royal Signal, the Royal Engineer and so on. The army is first and foremost that of the Queen, whose children and grandchildren were soldiers, like Prince Andrew, who was a helicopter pilot. Prince Harry, who served in Afghanistan in 2013 as co-pilot of the Apache helicopter and who is now the recognized promoter of the Invictus Games, designed to support the war wounded. Other members of the family are colonels (honorary) of regiments, such as Prince Charles, who is honorary colonel of the Parachute Regiment and the Welsh Guards, or the Queen herself, who is colonel-in-chief of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, or Princess Anne, who is honorary colonel of the Signal Corps. The Army is the Queen, and the Queen is the Nation! It is an extremely strong feeling.

The only period that has left a bad memory in public opinion and in the military itself is the engagement in Northern Ireland. At that time, the military was not allowed to be dressed in street clothes and they embodied the division and civil war that was tearing the Kingdom apart. But apart from this painful experience, the army has always been held in high esteem by the general public.

This dates back at least to the Napoleonic period, when the army and the militia faced a deadly threat. The presence of militia regiments in the garrison towns of southern

England in the face of the possible landing of French troops is, moreover, described very favourably by Jane AUSTEEN in *Pride and Prejudice*. The soldiers enlivened life in the countryside and reassured the population. This feeling persisted after 1815, even if the Army lived through a period of leanness and effacement at that time. But the colonial wars, then the two World Wars, and the Cold War against the Soviet Union, revived the people's interest in their army. Its mission was clear; it was to defend the Kingdom's sacred soil and its immediate interests.

Things could have become more delicate with the end of conscription in 1963. But despite this potential distancing of the people from their army, recent operations such as the Falklands War, the first Gulf War, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and, above all, the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have never denied almost unconditional popular support.

Nevertheless, it can be seen that support for the armed forces is highly dependent on the missions they carry out. From 2006 to 2014, support for operations in Afghanistan rarely exceeded 30% of respondents and almost 70% of the population thought that the commitment in Iraq was not worth the losses incurred. Despite this, 90% of the population had a favourable opinion of the military itself. A distinction must therefore be drawn between "attachment to the army and its soldiers" and support for the political choices leading to their involvement.

The integration of the armies into the nation can be clearly seen in the annual Poppy campaign⁴¹ by the Royal British Legion, on the occasion of the celebration of the end of the First World War. Poppies are on sale in all public places, in all pubs. People of all ages display it on the street, politicians wear it ostentatiously, BBC journalists all have it on their lapels. We're not there yet in France with the cornflower, even if things are changing.

But a little-known army

And yet, the army is a little-known institution. The end of the period of intense engagement that it has just gone through during 10 years in Iraq and Afghanistan does not help the situation. Today it is mainly the bad news that prevails in the press: legal actions against some of the army's actions in Iraq and Afghanistan (there are more than 400 lawsuits pending against the army), budget cuts since the fall of the pound, erasure because of Brexit, which has occupied all political minds for the last three years. In addition to these already penalising phenomena, there has been a reduction in the number of personnel and the regrouping of regiments in large "military hubs" in the region of SALISBURY Plain in the west of LONDON or CATTERICK in North Yorkshire. All this does not facilitate exchanges between civilians and the military. The army is thus more and more an ignored professional universe, which perhaps explains the recruitment difficulties it is currently experiencing.

Who are the military, what are their missions? Why are we still talking about the suppression of prestigious units (the Royal Marines, for example)? What are the Army's major equipment? Few Britons could answer precisely these questions. As a Brigadier

currently serving at PJHQ42 as ChiefJ5 wrote to me "Traditionally, Army is only recognised in times of war".

The Army is therefore making a big effort in information and publicity in the media to overcome this handicap. It values the reserve, which has changed a lot in the last 15 years. It has become, as in France, an operational reserve and no longer has the old-fashioned image of "Dad's Army" (a famous TV series that brocades the national guards during the Second World War) that it had at the time of the Territorial Army. Reservists are the real thermometer of the army's integration into society. And all the testimonies confirm the great respect that citizens have for these part-time soldiers, who are regularly asked to speak in public or private schools about their experiences. In the world of work, being a reservist is more of an asset that one puts forward than a constraint that one hides because it penalizes the company. Bosses see the reservist as a performance accelerator.

Active officers are also very good at retraining and do not wait long before finding a civilian job. As the head of the PJHQ recently wrote to me, "The vast majority of officers find employment when retirement and good employment".

Finally, contrary to popular belief, the officer population is no longer the caste it was in the past when officers were essentially recruited from among the sons of soldiers who had served in the family regiment. The feminization of the armed forces, recruitment in universities and the opening up to minorities have largely changed this factor of distance between the army and the nation.

Thus the integration of the British army is rather positive despite the evolution of society, whose hedonistic aspects are, as in our country, far from the values of abnegation and sacrifice that prevail in the army. This is due to the deep history of the United Kingdom, its attachment to royalty and the patriotism that reigns unashamedly among our neighbours.

41] Badge representing a poppy. The money collected is intended to support the families of soldiers killed or wounded in battle.

42] Permanent Joint Headquarters.

Title : GDI (2S) Hervé BIZEUL

Author (s) : GDI (2S) Hervé BIZEUL

Release date 12/02/2021

FIND OUT MORE
