

From 'Bride to Body Bag': The Death of Corporal Sarah Bryant and the Gendered 'War on Terror'

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VICTORIA BASHAM, JUN 30 2008

The recent death of Corporal Sarah Bryant, the first British servicewoman to die on a "deliberate" operation in Afghanistan, attracted much attention from the UK print media [i]. Though killed alongside Corporal Sean Reeve, Lance Corporal Richard Larkin and Paul Stout, images and tributes to Corporal Bryant, the only woman casualty, have filled the most column inches. One explanation for this is that at least two of the servicemen who died in the same incident are suspected to have belonged to clandestine units and their families have requested privacy whilst they grieve [ii]. Another is that Bryant's death is particularly newsworthy as a rare occurrence. Since the end of the Second World War, relatively few servicewomen have become combat casualties, and though overstretch means that the military increasingly claim to "select people on the basis of what they can do, not on the basis of their gender", until just over a decade ago servicewomen were generally confined to auxiliary roles [iii]. However, images of a smiling Sarah Bryant and tributes from a grieving mother, father, widower and colleagues – are more than individual reactions to the premature death of a young, bright loved one. They reveal wider cultural discomfort towards the death of a young, bright servicewoman as a direct result of conflict. They also demonstrate the significance of gender to the legitimisation of the 'war on terror'. Tributes to Corporal Sarah Bryant may vary from article to article but her death has elicited some clear, salient, gendered reactions.

Among the images of Sarah Bryant that stare out at newspaper readers are several of her as a happy child, conveying a sense of the profound loss of her grieving parents. Another popular picture shows Bryant as an adult soldier posing with a broad smile in her combat fatigues in front of a Union Jack. It offers readers some insight into the pride of her colleagues over her commitment to a burgeoning career cut short. The most common images of Sarah Bryant however, show her in her bridal gown next to her husband, Carl Bryant, who wears full military dress. One of these images was the 'handout' photo for journalists covering Bryant's death; a visualisation of how her family thought she should be memorialised by the media. By replicating the Bryants' wedding photos, journalists and the British Ministry of Defence – who also used a wedding photo in their official tribute to Bryant – reinforce this particular aspect of loss. Bryant's death prevents her from fulfilling those aspects of her life she would have been able to as a bride. Thus whilst several reports tell of how Corporal Bryant wanted to be a soldier from an early age, that she knew the risks she faced, that she was a competent professional, and that she saw herself as equal to her male counterparts, the need to emphasise that she was a soldier *as well as* a bride betrays the cultural peculiarity of her death.

Another salient feature of the coverage of Corporal Bryant's death is that as a *woman* soldier she contributed something particular to operations in Afghanistan. Bryant was fully trained in combat intelligence practices and on a 'deliberate' operation at the time of her death. Yet media reports seem to identify a need to emphasise that she was not out of place as a servicewoman on a combat mission specifically because her sex allowed her to play a very particular role in it. As an individual, Corporal Bryant may have used her "linguistic skills as a speaker of the local Pashtu language" to monitor Taliban communications, but "as a woman" she searched and interrogated women prisoners [iv]. For proponents of the widespread contemporary liberal strategy of 'diversity', emphasising the particular ways in which women are invaluable to the military is important. It offers a way to promote women's participation in militaries without ever mounting a challenge to the arbitrary ways in which British military officials

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exclude women from 'close combat' roles and cast doubt on their suitability for these positions [v] .

Promoters of diversity buy into the British military's claims that servicewomen are 'inherently' different to servicemen but argue that this can be a source of strength and utility for militaries and for servicewomen. In this paradigm, Bryant's womanhood, and that of other women soldiers, becomes "essential" in conflict zones "because only they can talk to and search local women" and "no matter how strong servicemen are, they cannot do this job [as] so much of the work is winning hearts and minds" [vi] . The notion that servicewomen's 'strengths' are not physical, but lie in their capacities to change hearts and mindsets, reinforces cultural codes that define men and women in essentialist terms and in opposition to one another. Men are natural-born killers, women are not. Thus, tributes to Corporal Bryant's work "on extremely complex projects with Muslim women and children" obscure that she actively contributed intelligence that is likely to have led to violence and deaths. Bryant's attempts to 'improve the lives' of women and children in a country her father described to journalists as "13th century in its attitudes", and where he claims that women and children "were treated like dogs" [vii] , become the basis of her participation. Her role in Afghanistan is not one of violent intervention but of offering local Afghans "hope and confidence that they might eventually enjoy peace, progress and prosperity" [viii] . As 'empathetic' and perhaps even 'motherly' she is denied the agency to be 'warrior-like' by gender norms that establish "the ontological field" in which her body and her actions can be "given legitimate expression" [ix] .

Describing Sarah Bryant's contributions in primarily non-violent terms also allows politicians to use her death as a justification for waging psychological and violent operations against an enemy marked as morally inferior. In response to the death of Sarah Bryant, Sean Reeve, Richard Larkin and Paul Stout, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown stated that "our troops are the best in the world and fighting for the noblest of causes" [x] . Similarly, Defence Secretary Des Browne said that these soldiers "made the ultimate sacrifice...in pursuit of the aim of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan" [xi] . Racialised and gendered discourses suggest that British soldiers are fighting an enemy who not only refuses to share their values, but who is intent on negating them [xii] ; an enemy who refuses equality for women and children, and who, in the name of 'progress', must be challenged [xiii] . When liberal interventionist attempts to 'shock and awe' populations into submission did not bring about the sought after 'peace' dividend, coalition forces began to 'counter insurgents' by subjecting populations to practices aimed at winning their hearts and minds. Sarah Bryant, as a woman, has come to be regarded as particularly competent at these practices but in being killed by an enemy she was trying to 'help', she has also become a victim. Her death acts as "a stark, bloody reminder of the indiscriminate nature of the war being waged against British troops in Iraq and Afghanistan" [xiv] . Bryant, and her fellow servicewomen and servicemen, are what Sherene Razack has called '*white knights*' fighting against '*dark threats*' [xv] . They may inflict violence and suffering on populations but they do so for the purposes of peace; they may kill but their goal is to "make the country safe for development" [xvi] .

Most servicemen, as well as servicewomen, do not serve in combat positions, have never killed anyone, or possibly even been violent. However, all military personnel are trained to kill and possibly die in service. Likewise, though the role of modern western militaries is debatable, wielding violence remains its primary function. As a result, all soldiers are implicated in acts of violence simply by enlisting. Furthermore, cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity grant agency to male soldiers, regardless of their military role, by normalising the image of the combative soldier as man and ensuring that servicewomen remain liminal to the military's violent and primary function. Sarah Bryant may have been a soldier but she was also a bride and a woman trying to bring peace and prosperity to other women. Her death is extra-ordinary because no matter what she contributed to the military and no matter that she even died making those contributions, her embodiment means she is remembered as a victim of violence, not an active perpetrator of it. As a Western woman victim of an explosion in Afghanistan, her death is a cultural anomaly. It is especially shocking therefore that, as one journalist put it, 'two years ago, she was a glowing bride; [and] now the 26 year old is wearing a body bag' [xvii] .

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[i] Ministry of Defence, UK, 'Corporal Sarah Bryant, Corporal Sean Reeve, Lance Corporal Richard Larkin and Paul Stout killed in Afghanistan', online article, 19/6/08, available here. [last accessed 26/6/08].

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[ii] According to the British Ministry of Defence, Corporal Sean Reeve is a member of the Royal Signals. The regiments of Lance Corporal Richard Larkin and Paul Stout have not been confirmed – see Ministry of Defence, UK, 'Corporal Sarah Bryant, Corporal Sean Reeve, Lance Corporal Richard Larkin and Paul Stout killed in Afghanistan'. Several media sources claim that Corporal Sean Reeve, Lance Corporal Richard Larkin and Paul Stout were all members of the Special Air Service (SAS) reserves. Paul Stout has also been reported as a member of the non-military Secret Service (aka MI6). This would explain why he has no military rank in reports. The clandestine nature of the SAS and MI6 means it is customary not to reveal the identities of personnel, even in death. As Corporal Sarah Bryant worked for the Intelligence Corps it is also likely that she would have worked with SAS and MI6 personnel.

[iii] Major Bruce Spencer cited in Alistair Taylor, 'Cpl Sarah Bryant remembered' in *The Sun*, online edition, available at: http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/campaigns/our_boys/article1316887.ece [last accessed 26/6/08],

[iv] David Brown and Siobhan Kennedy, 'I love her now and always' – husband's tribute to Sarah Bryant, first female soldier killed in Afghanistan' in *Times Online*, 20/6/08, available at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article4171532.ece> [last accessed 26/6/08].

[v] British servicewomen are barred from serving in the Royal Marines General Service, the Household Cavalry, Infantry, Royal Armoured Corps and the RAF Regiment except in attached billets.

[vi] Sally Brook, 'Army girls are crucial' in *The Sun*, online edition, 20/6/08, available at: http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/campaigns/our_boys/article1316887.ece [last accessed 26/6/08].

[vii] Diana Appleyard, 'Don't worry dad, I'll be home in a month' – final email of soldier Sarah' in *The Mail Online*, 20/6/08, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1027891/Dont-worry-dad-ill-home-month-final-email-soldier-Sarah.html> [26/6/08].

[viii] Corporal Sarah Bryant's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Jim Suggit, cited in Alistair Taylor, 'Cpl Sarah Bryant remembered'.

[ix] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York/London: Routledge, 10th anniversary edition with a new preface, 1999): xxiii.

[x] Cited in Ministry of Defence, UK, 'Corporal Sarah Bryant, Corporal Sean Reeve, Lance Corporal Richard Larkin and Paul Stout killed in Afghanistan'.

[xi] Cited in Ibid.

[xii] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963); Sherene Razack, 'Those Who "Witness the Evil"' in *Hypatia*, 18, 1 (2003):204-211.

[xiii] Laura J. Shepherd, 'Veiled references: Constructions of Gender in the Bush Administration Discourse on the Attacks on Afghanistan Post-9/11' in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8, 1 (2006):19-41.

[xiv] Diana Appleyard, 'Don't worry dad, I'll be home in a month' – final email of soldier Sarah' in *The Mail Online*, 20/6/08, available here. [26/6/08].

[xv] Sherene Razack, *Dark Threats, White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping, and the New Imperialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

[xvi] Mark Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007): 195-6.

[xvii] Cassandra Jardine, 'Mourn Sarah Bryant as a soldier, not a woman' in *The Telegraph*, 20/6/08, online edition,

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