

### Chapter 3

#### **‘Making a contribution to the war effort’: reactions to reserved status, masculinity and the military**

In 1939 Sid Archer was nineteen, working as an engineer in Gainsborough’s agricultural machinery manufacturer Marshall, Sons & Co. Sixty years later he was interviewed by BBC Lincolnshire for the British Library’s Millennium Memory Bank, an initiative to record the testimonies of ordinary people on the eve of the new century. Towards the end of the interview he reflected, unprompted, upon his wartime experiences:

One of my regrets is that I was in a reserved occupation. I would like to have gone and fought a bit. I would have liked to have been in one of the forces, preferably the air force. I would like to have done that but there was never a chance. We was told we were building midget submarines and it did a lot of good. But it didn’t seem the same. I had a lot of friends I lost . . . A lot of lads went and I didn’t . . . It did seem, I often feel it. I say even my wife was in the forces and I wasn’t.<sup>1</sup>

A lingering disappointment in Archer’s life was *not* fighting in the Second World War. Despite his acknowledgement that close acquaintances who were conscripted into the services were killed, he wished he too had been able to enlist, repeating three times that he ‘would have liked’ to. This is all the more keenly felt because he perceived himself to be in the minority. In addition to his friends, even his future wife served in the forces, while he was denied the opportunity by a government that considered he was of more use continuing in his trade thus making his separation from military service even more acute. Yet to Archer constructing midget submarines ‘didn’t seem the same’ as fighting. He is not alone in expressing a sense of regret over his wartime experience. Of the fifty six men interviewed

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<sup>1</sup> British Library, C900/0956, Sid Archer.

for this project, twenty eight attempted to enlist in the military, of whom four were ultimately successful and a further two joined the Merchant Navy.<sup>2</sup> Military service was evidently a powerful lure to young men. This chapter explores our interview cohort's reactions to their reserved status in order to understand fully what being 'reserved' meant to the men who were labelled as such.

Current historical understandings emphasise the pervasive ideal of the military man in British wartime culture. This was not a new phenomenon. Graham Dawson states that 'the soldier hero has proved to be one of the most durable and powerful forms of idealised masculinity within Western cultural traditions since the times of the Ancient Greeks.'<sup>3</sup> However, the First World War arguably disrupted this reverence of martial masculinity. Alison Light, for example, argues that the inter-war period saw the blossoming of an altogether more homely ideal as British society began to shun warfare.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in the 1920s and 1930s there was a proliferation of anti-war literature, including Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, which, until recent works by revisionist historians, had long been considered to capture the anti-war sentiment pervading inter-war Britain.<sup>5</sup> Undeniably, when the horns of war sounded for a second time in a quarter century the reaction was muted. The British populace in 1939 did not repeat the jubilations which had greeted the announcement of war in 1914.<sup>6</sup> Welsh teacher Idris Davies wrote in his diary

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<sup>2</sup> The Merchant Navy, which was also a reserved occupation, was often seen in wartime as analogous to military service. It was certainly conveyed and understood as a much more war-related role than the industrial jobs predominantly undertaken by our interview cohort.

<sup>3</sup> Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imaginings of Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.8.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Graves, *Goodbye To All That* (London: Anchor, 1929); Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933). There was, however, a great deal of continuity in the reverence of martial masculinities in this period, as we shall see. Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000); Martin Francis, 'Attending to Ghosts: Some Reflections on the Disavowals of British Great War Historiography', *Twentieth Century British History*, 25:3 (2014), pp.347-67.

<sup>6</sup> That is not to say that there was just one single reaction to the outbreak of either war. Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

on 2 September 1939 that ‘It looks like another Great War. Appeasement has failed, as most of us knew it would fail . . . So here we are on the brink of war and ruin again. All the young men who were slaughtered in the 1914-1918 shambles seem to have died in vain.’<sup>7</sup> Davies’ fear of a repeat of the horrors experienced during the First World War was widely felt. When Britain declared war on Germany the next day, the planned for military mobilisation was put into effect with the passing of the National Service (Armed Forces) Act and young men who were to be conscripted in to the services had to be persuaded of the attractions of the military. As Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird argue, ‘political rhetoric recast and rehabilitated the heroism of soldiering’.<sup>8</sup> Military service once again became the pinnacle of manliness. Yet this was a modified hero. Like the First World War Tommy, he was not only brave, courageous and willing to give up his life for his country but was also kind, funny and had strong bonds to his mates. Sonya Rose identifies this ideal as ‘temperate masculinity’ and notes: ‘In order for men to be judged as good citizens, they needed to demonstrate their virtue by being visibly in the military. It was only then that the components of hegemonic masculinity, as detailed above, could cohere.’<sup>9</sup> Yet this is perhaps too simplistic. As Connell notes, masculinity is experienced hierarchically and even the military were not an undifferentiated mass.<sup>10</sup> The RAF, and in the summer of 1940 the fighter pilot in particular, were very much the pinnacle of the masculine hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Linsey Robb’s research in to the wartime depiction of civilian working men has demonstrated that while most civilian occupations were largely shown to be secondary, and no civilian occupation was ever as lauded as the military, those which faced high levels of danger, namely the

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<sup>7</sup> National Library of Wales, MS 10812 D.

<sup>8</sup> Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, ‘The Home Guard in Britain in the Second World War: Uncertain Masculinities?’ in Paul Higate (ed.), *Military Masculinities* (Michigan: Praeger, 2003), p.58.

<sup>9</sup> Sonya O. Rose, *Which People’s War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.160-1; p.196.

<sup>10</sup> R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p.77; R. W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p.10.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Merchant Navy and the fire services, were portrayed in ways which consciously aped the heroic depiction granted to the military.<sup>12</sup> Culturally, at least, there was a hierarchy of masculinities which stretched from the home front to the battle front. This chapter explores how this complex hierarchy of masculine roles was experienced, and retrospectively expressed in oral history interviews, by men who had been engaged in reserved occupations. For some, as we shall see, a desire to enlist in the military, to wear uniform and to actively fight in the defence of one's country was paramount and overrode the need for their expertise on the home front. Attempts to escape their reserved status were met with varying degrees of success. For others, reserved status provided an opportunity to remain in their locale with their families, to earn high wages and to live in comparable safety and was accepted and even welcomed. It might be tempting to adopt Penny Summerfield's useful classification of her female interviewees into 'heroes', who embraced the opportunity to actively serve and felt that the war could not be won without them, and 'stoics', who reluctantly tolerated the state's direction of their labour, and apply this to our 'heroic' men who sought to evade their reserved status and enlist in the forces and our 'stoic' men who accepted their retention on the home front. Yet this polarisation masks a more fluid spectrum of complex responses to reserved status, as we shall see.

### **'Have you done your bit?': the desire to enlist**

The uniformed 'soldier hero,' who was fighting to halt the Nazi juggernaut and liberate occupied Europe, and the heroic female war worker, who was 'manning' the home front in the absence of men who had left to join the forces, were widely celebrated in film, radio, posters and in print. The civilian man, on the other hand, was often invisible in popular

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<sup>12</sup> Linsey Robb: *Men at Work: The Working Man in British Culture, 1939–1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

culture as chapter one noted. Unsurprisingly, then, many men who were prevented from joining the services because of the intrinsic value of their occupations to the war effort were keen to escape their reserved status, enrol in the military, don uniform and serve overseas. Twenty eight of our interviewees attempted to enlist in the forces. Although most of those interviewed understood the importance of their reserved work, many felt they should be doing 'more'. Thomas Carmichael, for example, left his work in a Glasgow shipyard to become a Merchant Navy engineer. When asked if he knew how important shipyards were to the war effort he replied 'in a way, yes, but I still thought I could be doing something more important at sea as an engineer.'<sup>13</sup> Carmichael's wartime experiences in the mercantile marine were centred upon the transport of cargoes which, although vital to the war effort, was perhaps no more 'important' than the building of ships. However, his service in the Merchant Navy took him to the front line of the Battle of the Atlantic where he was subjected to the perils of torpedo, where on one occasion his ship was sunk, and the freezing conditions of the Arctic Convoys. This danger brought him closer to the front line of war and thus he considered he was playing a more significant role: 'Oh the work was very important . . . [W]e were making a contribution to the war effort.' Wartime policeman John Cresswell was more explicit about his desire to do 'more' in his 2005 interview with the Imperial War Museum. He described how he and his colleagues decided to enlist:

We got together to make ready to go in to the forces. There was no specific instruction except that we just decided that was what we wanted to do. We wanted to play our bit . . . Oh yes we discussed it and there we were. Young, fit young men doing our bit I know, in a civilian capacity, but we wanted to do more than that and we wanted to join the forces.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Carmichael, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 15 April 2013 (SOHC 050/35).

<sup>14</sup> IWM SA, 28932, John Cresswell, reel 1, 2005 (day unspecified).

With his senior officer's permission Cresswell was ultimately accepted in to the RAF as a pilot and saw active service in the Far East. His emphasis on their youth and fitness making them suitable for military service mirrors contemporaneous perceptions that civilian men left on the home front were somehow impaired, either mentally or physically, and therefore not up to the task of enlisting. Moreover, this emphasis on doing 'more' by joining the forces, with its concomitant connotation of civilian men doing 'less', clearly shows there was a perceived hierarchy of masculine roles during the Second World War in which military service was positioned securely at the top.

For many young men, the pressure to be in uniform, or to be seen to want to be in uniform, was strong. For our young wartime cohort, the simple lure of the glamour of military dress was undeniably powerful. When asked why he wanted to be in the military Frank Blincow, a wartime apprentice draughtsman in London, responded that he 'liked the uniform.'<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Jim Lister, a Carlisle railway worker, remarked: 'Well you're a teenager and the uniform and one thing or another . . . There's a lot of lads that's in it just for the glory and whatever, the uniform.'<sup>16</sup> Many interviewees highlighted the uniform as a specific attraction. This was undoubtedly because young men who were not visibly identified as combatants risked public censure. This had been especially evident during the First World War, as discussed in chapter two. Women's readings of men's patriotism, and by extension their masculinity, hinged upon khaki uniform, something which the male civilian conspicuously lacked. The uniform thus connoted far more than military service; it was an external emblem of the wearer's fulfilment of their patriotic masculinity and their national duty. In the Second World War, the willingness of civilian men to undertake unpaid voluntary work in the Home Guard, Air Raid Precautions and the Auxiliary Fire Service in

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<sup>15</sup> Frank Blincow, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 30 May 2013 (SOHC 050/56).

<sup>16</sup> Jim Lister, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 19 April 2013 (SOHC 050/38).

addition to their full time jobs, enabled civilian workers to adopt a uniform, thereby enabling them to access the status that a military uniform bestowed, and retain a sense of masculinity.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, whose interviewees remembered their Home Guard uniform as a ‘prize possession’, argue that this is why some men were attracted to the organisation.<sup>18</sup> It provided them with an essential signifier of martial masculinity, marking them out as a member of a military organisation which only those in the know might spot was not an army uniform. For Harry McGregor, one of our interviewees who had worked as an apprentice engineer in the North British Locomotive Railway Works in wartime Glasgow, volunteering for civil defence was a route to a uniform that would impress. He recalled that he and his friend who was serving in the Royal Marines went to the cinema together: ‘I said “well, let’s go in our uniform.” They must have thought, you see when you get on the tram and “there’s a poor soldier there”, you know. [Laughter] . . . It made a bit of a difference. You had this, you had a flash, “Home Guard”, most people wouldn’t see it, just think you’re Army.’<sup>19</sup> Thus in spite of the wartime rhetoric of a ‘people’s war’ in which everyone had an important role to play, the categorisation of individuals as either civilians or combatants remained paramount, with many of our interviewees wishing to be categorised as military men.<sup>20</sup>

While McGregor endeavoured to pass as a soldier by wearing his Home Guard uniform, for others this was not enough. For young men wishing to get into a real military uniform and escape their reserved status, the armed services exerted a strong pull. The high status of the RAF and the Schedule’s permitting of reserved men to become aircrew meant

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<sup>17</sup> This, however, was not unproblematic. Many in civil defence had to be convinced it was a ‘real man’s job’ because it was largely associated with women and older men. Lucy Noakes, ‘Serve to Save: Gender, Citizenship and Civil Defence in Britain 1937-41’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 47:4 (2012), pp.734-53.

<sup>18</sup> Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*, p.224.

<sup>19</sup> Harry McGregor, interviewed by Arthur McIvor, 13 July 2009 (SOHC 050/06).

<sup>20</sup> Corinna Peniston-Bird, ‘Classifying the Body in the Second World War: British Men in and Out of Uniform’, *Body & Society*, 9 (2003), pp.31-48. Here p.34.

this service attracted particular attention. The blue air force uniforms were cited by a number of war veterans as especially desirable, reflecting the high status of that particular service in wartime. It was particularly appealing to young men who wished to escape their reserved status. Alan Johns, whose story was uploaded on to the BBC ‘People’s War’ website, recollected:

In 1942 I joined the Royal Air Force. I was in a reserved occupation on the railways and the only service I could join was the aircrew, for which I volunteered. When I joined up the aircrew wore white flashes in their forage caps to distinguish them from other RAF units, and I was very proud to wear them.<sup>21</sup>

The flash, which was a visual signifier of being a member of the aircrew, trumped even the generic uniform of the RAF. A Mass Observation diarist, an office worker but not reserved, was similarly keen to enlist in the RAF for its blue uniform:

This week for me has been dominated by the announcement on Sunday Oct 1 [1939], of the calling up of the 20-22 class. I shall have to go and am not really sorry – in fact I’m looking forward to my training . . . I know of four [friends] who are impatient to be called up. Most lads seem to want to join the RAF which evidently has a big fascination. For myself the only temptation to join it is the blue uniform which I prefer to khaki.<sup>22</sup>

Martin Francis notes this phenomenon was widespread stating: ‘The most beguiling emblem of the flyer’s allure was their ashy blue uniform with the Flying Badge worn above the right upper jacket pocket. The blue uniforms of the RAF were a dramatic contrast with the drab brown uniform of the army.’<sup>23</sup> Some of our interviewees similarly noted that the RAF held

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Some Wartime Memories of the Railways and RAF’, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/71/a2280971.shtml> Accessed 26 September 2014.

<sup>22</sup> MOA. D107, October 1939.

<sup>23</sup> Francis, *The Flyer*, p.24.

a particular allure to themselves and their friends. Telephone engineer Walker Leith, who was eventually released to the army, declared he had wanted to join the RAF because ‘that was what everybody was, flying duties, everybody, all, most of your pals were talking of flying duties. It was a sort of, a romantic, well I wouldn’t say romantic, that’s the wrong word, but it was a sort of exciting thing to do . . . Glamorous, possibly, yeah.’<sup>24</sup> While Leith was reluctant to use the word ‘romantic’ it is evident that it was an idealised image of life in the services which drew him to enlist. As noted in chapter one, the RAF was a new service, formed only in 1918, and with its youthful personnel who engaged their Spitfires and Hurricanes in aerial combat with Messerschmitts, it had a glamorous reputation. Leith was not atypical in being drawn to the thrill of becoming a ‘flyboy’. These were young men who were susceptible to romantic notions regarding the military. Youthful naivety was certainly a key factor in Thomas Cantwell’s desire to leave his apprenticeship as a plater and enlist: ‘Well everybody was talkin’ about the war. You know, at eighteen, gullible and things like that, you know and we just thought, “why don’t we go and help?” That was the idea, in there and help.’<sup>25</sup> This was the case for half of our interviewees, many of whom were not yet eighteen when the war began, with the oldest being only twenty eight at its close. Enthralled by the glamour of the uniform, these young men were eager to join the services.<sup>26</sup> Older single men, husbands and fathers may have been less susceptible. Their world view was arguably different from younger reserved men or those with lesser familial responsibilities. Of our seven interviewees who were married by 1945, not one attempted to enlist.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that the anti-war literature, which is so commonly cited as an influencing factor on increasing pacifist sentiment, would have reached these young,

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<sup>24</sup> Walker Leith, interviewed by Linsey Robb 2 April 2013 (SOHC 050/26).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Cantwell, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 24 May 2013 (SOHC 050/55).

<sup>26</sup> At least, they told us in interviews that this was the case. Some of the twenty eight may have retrospectively assigned this impulse to themselves to construct a composed sense of self as being thwarted in their attempts to enlist.

single men. Instead they would have likely been subject to representations of war in stories and poetry which still depicted it in a positive way. Writing about his childhood in the inter-war period, Glyn Loosmore, who joined the Special Operations Executive, parachuting into France after D-Day,<sup>27</sup> emphatically states why so many young men were eager to serve:

[I]t was a time when most middle-class homes possessed Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia*. I urge you to look at the edition that was in print between the wars; it helped to shape a generation. It contains an extraordinary number of poems that extol heroism and self-sacrifice. It gave boys of my generation the notion that it was praiseworthy to serve, and, if necessary, die for one's country . . . 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', 'The Last Fight of the Revenge' and 'How Horatius kept the Bridge' . . . 'The Private of the Buffs', 'The Red Thread of Honour' . . . Grenfell's 'Into Battle', and Hodgson's 'Before Action'. Learn those poems and you will probably want to be a soldier yourself . . . At school we used to sing Kipling's 'Teach us to rule ourselves always/ controlled and certainly night to day;/ That we may bring, if need arise,/ No maimed or worthless sacrifice.'<sup>28</sup>

Inter-war working class households might not have held copies of Mee's publication but boys from more humble backgrounds would have likely read comics and stories which, as Michael Paris notes, were populated by soldier characters. *Boy's Own Paper*, *Chums*, *Modern Boy* and *Champion* all used war-stories in their pages, with some even setting adventures in the trenches of the First World War.<sup>29</sup> Immersed in patriotic poetry and adventure literature, it is unsurprising that so many young single men were eager to join the

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<sup>27</sup> Juliette Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines: Gender, Passing and the SOE in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Letter written to Juliette Pattinson, 9 October 2000.

<sup>29</sup> Paris, *Warrior Nation*, p.151.

services despite knowing what happened to those who marched off to war over twenty five years before. For some others, brought up in radical working class communities in places like Clydeside and Merseyside, the lure to arms was linked not so much to patriotism but to a sense that Fascism was a threat to the working classes, a feeling that had drawn many young British men to fight on the side of the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>30</sup>

With the shameful prospect of having to inform their future children that they had not ‘done their bit’, single men undertaking reserved occupations could also be motivated to enlist in the forces by the notion of their own legacy. Men understood that they were living through a momentous time and had a desire to play a central role in events. The need to be ‘doing our bit’ as Cresswell asserted or to ‘go and help’ as Cantwell stated, was prevalent among our interviewees. With skills which could be useful in a military context, many of our cohort endeavoured to move out of their civilian trades into a parallel military one as permitted by the Schedule. Telephone engineer Ronald Tonge, who was content with his reserved status and civilian job, nevertheless felt compelled to enlist in the belief that it was better to die fighting for freedom than to lose the war and Britain become occupied. He recalled a specific propaganda poster, proclaiming ‘Men in Reserved Occupations Can Now Fly With The RAF’ which presented him with the opportunity to enlist:

I can remember one . . . It said ‘change your overalls, volunteer for pilot, navigator, bomb aimer’ and it showed you a man at a lathe with his overalls, and then in flying overalls at the bottom. We were both, both Roy and I, happy at our work . . . But I think we both came to the conclusions that it

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<sup>30</sup> Jack Jones, a young socialist born in 1913, for example, had fought and been wounded in the Spanish Civil War and had attempted to leave his position as a trade union official in Coventry to join the services in the Second World War. Jack Jones, *Union Man: An Autobiography* (London: Collins, 1986), p.104.

would be better to be dead than lose. I mean it's hard to get over to people . . . And if it takes volunteering for aircrew, 'cause the reason, the big thing came was, that they were losing, a lot, and it wasn't done light heartedly, and I'm sure that my memory's right, that we said, I mean we swore, well we might as well bloody well go down fighting, as lose. So we volunteered . . . What do we tell our kids when they say 'what did you do in the war, dad?' . . . Well, that was one of the things we said. There was a feeling that, have you done your bit?<sup>31</sup>

Tonge invoked an infamous First World War propaganda poster, 'What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?' to explain his reason for enlisting. Interestingly, as a single childless man, Tonge was moved to enlist by imagining the shame which might befall on his then hypothetical offspring, a driving factor which may have been less persuasive to those reserved men who already had children. However, Tonge's assertions suggests that, for many of our young interviewees at least, attitudes towards warfare had shifted little, regardless of the horrors of the First World War. Indeed, for many there seemed to be scant recognition that 'doing your bit' did not solely mean military service. That their reserved occupation status indicated that their civilian contributions were highly prized, by the state at least, did not seem to impinge on many men's understandings of wartime contributions. For most young men, 'to serve' and 'to do one's bit' had purely military connotations.

Like Tonge, many interviewees did not attempt to enlist out of a burning desire for the uniform or a simple need to face combat. Indeed, for some the social and cultural pressure to be in uniform could make men attempt to enlist who had no desire to do so. John O'Halloran, who worked in aircraft manufacturer Napier and Sons in west London, stated:

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<sup>31</sup> Ronald Tonge, interviewed by Linsey Robb 28 March 2013 (SOHC 050/24).

They [his employers] told me I was in a Reserved Occupation when I went there, and said that if I got call up papers, I mustn't answer them. I was [to] give it to them and they would not let me go. But when I did receive them, I felt a bit, not very brave to just sit behind them, and I sneaked off and got interviewed. But because I've had a stiff leg all my life, well since four, they finally turned me down . . . I didn't want to [join the forces], but I felt it was up to me . . . I didn't want to hide behind the job, if you know what I mean? And I was good at signalling, I was a good Morse telegrapher, and I thought they might use me signalling. I didn't want to go in. Because when the colonel said, 'I'm afraid we can't take you cos your stiff leg prevents you kneeling properly, and you can't do this, you can't do that', said, 'so I'm afraid we're going to have to grade you number four and things will have to be very desperate if we ever call you up'. So, I said, 'well for my sake, as well as the country's, I hope it won't be necessary', and it wasn't!<sup>32</sup>

O'Halloran twice stated that he had no desire to be in the armed forces and was relieved at being classed as medically unfit thereby making military service highly unlikely. It is clear from O'Halloran's testimony that he attempted to enlist not from a desire to be in uniform but from a sense of guilt and belief in doing one's duty, a common feeling among our interview cohort. It was not that they yearned for military service but that they understood that they should appear to want to be in the military. Indeed, Corinna Peniston-Bird notes 'Working in a reserved occupation was only acceptable if the individual longed to join the Armed Forces, but nobly sacrificed his desire for the good of the country.'<sup>33</sup> For some interviewees the mere act of attempting to enlist assuaged their conscience. Thomas

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<sup>32</sup> John O'Halloran, interviewed by Linsey Robb 22 March 2013 (SOHC 050/19).

<sup>33</sup> Peniston-Bird, 'Classifying the Body', p.40.

Cantwell was turned down for the RAF because of his reserved status. When asked how he felt about this he replied: ‘Not too bad ‘cos I liked me, I liked workin’. So it was one of them things where you said “well we tried.” And we just went back. And that was the end of it.’<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, Jim Lister was accepted for service in the army but was returned to his job on the railways when he admitted he was in a reserved occupation. He stated:

I think I was relieved in a way. I don’t know. It struck you, the feeling would have been different I think if I had been failed. If I’d have been failed at the medical or something like that. But eh, I knew when they said ‘you’re reserved’ that there was no good crying over spilt milk. There’s no way I was going to get [into the services]. I volunteered. I couldn’t volunteer for anything else, they wouldn’t have you.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast to physically impaired O’Halloran, Lister was able to maintain his masculine self-image by drawing on his physical fitness. He understood that he was fit for the armed forces, but the government needed his skills elsewhere. Physical prowess, which had been a key tenet of masculinity in the inter-war period, remained so in wartime. Indeed, Emma Newlands’ examination of the body in the British Army during the Second World War notes the centrality of physicality. Many men were indignant when their allotted military grade did not match their own sense of their physical proficiency.<sup>36</sup> Conversely, it seems, civilian men were able to draw on their physicality to reassure themselves of their masculinity when they lacked military uniform, an issue which will be explored more fully in chapter five.

The principal reason for wishing to leave their reserved occupation and join the armed forces was a pervasive feeling of being ‘left out’. The language used by men to describe this was often extremely emotive. Craig Inglis, reserved cobbler and later Bevin

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas Cantwell, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 24 May 2013 (SOHC 050/55).

<sup>35</sup> Jim Lister, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 19 April 2013 (SOHC 050/38).

<sup>36</sup> Emma Newlands, *Civilians into Soldiers: War, the Body and British Army Recruits, 1939–1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p.44.

Boy, who was based in his home town of Kilmarnock, Ayrshire throughout the war, recalled his feelings at both his brothers being in uniform: ‘Oh a wis proud of them. We thought they were the bees knees. But the ane that’s ninety two he wis one of Montgomery’s Desert Rats. The other wis a bomb disposal. And a wis naebody.’<sup>37</sup> Inglis’s final statement is striking: without a military uniform he considered himself to be a ‘nobody’, a person without interest or worth. His lack of military service clearly still rankled nearly seventy years after the war ended. Later in his interview he stated ‘Everyone had gone . . . Every ane of them, bar two that were really, really medically unsound . . . You were jealous of them [in the forces]. The experiences they were gettin’. Finished up ye were no’ envious, yer really sad.’<sup>38</sup> For Inglis to identify jealousy and envy, strong words with highly negative connotations, shows how affected he was by his lack of military service. Even more candidly, Inglis admits that this coveting of his friends’ military careers eventually turned to sorrow at the thought of the experiences he was missing. Inglis was not alone in reacting so emotionally in recalling his wartime status.<sup>39</sup> When talking about their lack of military service many of our interviewees invoked poignant language; indeed it was often the most animated and expressive part of their interview. When asked how he felt about his brother being in the forces Harold Scragg, Tyneside mechanic, responded that the war had been ‘a dead life’. He followed this up by stating: ‘Time just rolled over. And so to me, in that particular time, that was a dead year or two because I think I should’ve been in the army.’<sup>40</sup> Again, the imagery here is striking: Scragg notes that ‘time just rolled over’, it was a ‘dead’ period. He felt he was just marking time without making any contribution to the war. Moreover, the war made no demands on

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<sup>37</sup> Craig Inglis, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 10 May 2013 (SOHC 050/38).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> It was not only men in reserved occupations who recalled their dismay at being prevented from serving in the forces. Many Bevin Boys, who were directed by ballot to the mines instead of the services, were also frustrated. It was ‘a bitter blow’ noted Bert Mitchell, ‘I’d Rather Go to Prison’, BBC *People’s War* Archive, Article ID A4252330, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/30/a4252330.shtml> Accessed 15 September 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Harold Scragg, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 9 May 2013 (SOHC 050/47).

him. Frank Blincow, wartime apprentice draughtsman, similarly stated he was ‘robbed’ of the experience of being in the armed forces while Walker Leith, who was eventually released from his job as a telephone engineer to join the Royal Signals, declared that he was ‘stuck around in a reserved occupation’.<sup>41</sup> The concept of being ‘stuck’ was a recurrent narrative trope. Most men in reserved occupations *were* immobile, held statically in position in their communities while many of their contemporaries were scattered throughout the world fighting the war and even mobile women were being directed across the country to do war work. This loss of status could be keenly felt. John Hiscutt, who worked as a tool maker in Plessey Company’s aircraft factory in London, noted:

I think I lost out a bit in sort of [being] street-wise as you might say. I just worked at home and didn’t leave my family and didn’t go anywhere. When the lads come out the Army I mean you had to look after yourself obviously, but you know with, you had to be number one and look after yourself. I found out when they came back they were much more confident. It took me some while to get over that. As I say, I think they all came back more sure of themselves.<sup>42</sup>

Hiscutt felt he had lost out by remaining at home and that other men who had joined the forces had derived self-assurance from the knowledge of their elevated status and their more worldly experiences. That this loss of masculine standing is invoked most regularly through, what John Tosh calls, ‘homosocial relationships’ is notable.<sup>43</sup> As Connell argues, masculine ideals are not ingrained but rather socially constructed.<sup>44</sup> As such, they are understood and

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<sup>41</sup> Walker Leith, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 2 April 2013 (SOHC 050/26).

<sup>42</sup> John Hiscutt, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 25 April 2013 (SOHC 050/42).

<sup>43</sup> John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (London: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>44</sup> Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, p.12.

expressed socially: ‘relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit and so on. There is a gender politics within masculinity.’<sup>45</sup> For our interviewees their perceived loss was most evident when they were forced to make assessments of their peers. Such comparisons made many of our interviewees feel emasculated, challenging their sense of masculinity and often pressurising them into attempting to enlist.

For our young interviewees the desire to join up was palpable. In the First World War, the external pressure to volunteer was explicit with such shaming campaigns as ‘Women of Britain Say “Go”!’ and ‘Daddy, what did you do in the Great War?’ Other posters directly questioned the qualities of men who avoided military service, suggesting they would make poor husbands and fathers.<sup>46</sup> However, recruitment strategy in the Second World War was much more measured and the state avoided such shaming tactics. The experiences of our interviewees mirrored this shift in popular sensibilities about warfare, with very few reporting any negative comments about being out of uniform. Fred Millican, who worked at engineering firm Vickers-Armstrong as a metallurgist, stated:

I was never sort of picked on and said, “well why are you not in the Army?” or anything, you know . . . “We’re fighting for King and Country.” . . . I never experienced that at all . . . There was never any problems. Everybody just seemed to accept you were either working, or you were in [the] forces. Nobody bothered.<sup>47</sup>

Engineer Eddie Menday stated: ‘No, funnily enough, no . . . because I think people knew that everybody was in it together . . . [S]omebody was doing something, somewhere, along

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<sup>45</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, p.37.

<sup>46</sup> Unknown Artist, ‘To the young women of London’ (1915), Imperial War Museum London. PST 4903; Unknown Artist, ‘Five Questions to the Men Who Have Not Enlisted’ (1915), Imperial War Museum, London PST 5129.

<sup>47</sup> Fred Millican, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 26 March 2013 (SOHC 050/20).

the line.<sup>48</sup> The wartime rhetoric of ‘all in it together’ permeated Menday’s consciousness and seemingly those of his wider community. In the collective endeavour of the ‘people’s war’, those manufacturing scientific instruments had as vital a role to play as the soldier. While outright praise for reserved workers was rare, the experiences of our interviewees suggest that there does seem to have been at least a tacit acceptance of their presence on the home front. Charles Hill, wartime toolmaker, emphatically disagreed with the questions regarding negative comments about his lack of uniform:

Nobody said anything to me. I don’t remember anybody, others [getting] criticised for it. I think it was an accepted thing because the government decided you do this, you do that and you do that. And well it, you can’t argue, you know. I don’t doubt there are quite a few of them alive thought ‘why is [Charles] in a reserved occupation? Our so-and-so is in the Army, both the same age.’ . . . I don’t doubt that went on but, nobody, no, nobody ever said it.<sup>49</sup>

Despite not experiencing any prejudice, Hill was convinced that his reserved status caused some people to privately query his ineligibility for service. Similarly, Derek Sims, aircraft factory worker, stated: ‘I can imagine somebody coming and saying “it’s all right for you, you’re in a reserved occupation”, you know, “I’ve got called up.” I can imagine that going on. But personally, I’d not met it myself.’<sup>50</sup> For some interviewees, then, despite never having directly encountered any explicit resentment, there was an acknowledgement that others may have questioned their reserved status privately. They had internalised widespread cultural notions about what constituted valid male service and their own insecurities shaped how they thought others saw them.

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<sup>48</sup> Eddie Menday, interviewed by Linsey Robb 15 May 2013 (SOHC 050/50).

<sup>49</sup> Charles Hill (pseudonym), interviewed by Linsey Robb, 16 April 2013 (SOHC 050/37).

<sup>50</sup> Derek Sims, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 20 February 2013 (SOHC 050/012).

Rather than being external then, it would appear that the pressure to enlist often came from the men themselves. Aircraft worker Derek Sims hinted at the internalised nature of this pressure when he stated: 'I think the pressures in the forces side is internally built. Yourself, you put yourself under pressure. You don't really need somebody outside to get, chase you about, you do it, you're chasing yourself about.'<sup>51</sup> Similarly, John Stephenson, Yorkshire railway worker, stated:

Oh no. No pressure. Just I think all my mates, most of my mates and lads I used to knock about with at Northallerton, they'd all been called up. There were just two or three that was left and thought well we might as well join up ourselves. 'Cos they used to come home on leave and say they were having a nice time. They were alright so we'd join up and do the same thing. It was a different story altogether I think if we'd have gone in, but nobody, there was no pressure or anything like that. I mean I'd gone through, when I worked at the lemonade factory Bell and Goldsborough, them that bottled the lemonade, and delivering them to the army camps. I mean the camps and the army had priority and all this stuff and once I'd lost my wallet and a place at Scruton and when I got back I thought 'oh hell' . . . As I went into the camp one of the soldiers there said 'I've got your wallet lad.' You know, there was nothing to say 'you should be in the forces.' He's just found my wallet and gave it to me.<sup>52</sup>

Expecting trouble at the army base when he turned up to collect his wallet for being a physically fit civilian of enlistment age, Stephenson was surprised to find that the soldier was pleasant to him. Neither the soldier nor Stephenson's friends who were conscripted

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> John Stephenson, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 23 April 2013 (SOHC 050/39).

‘pressured’ him and made him feel that he ought to volunteer; rather, it was something he felt he ought to do.

There is, then, much evidence to contradict Sonya Rose’s assertion that ‘ill-will was certainly widespread’ regarding those out of uniform.<sup>53</sup> Animosity towards their reserved status was not routinely experienced and outright slurs were incredibly rare. As a cohort, they simply did not experience overt prejudice and abuse. However, that is not to say that negative reactions were non-existent. One-off episodes were reported by a couple of interviewees. Electrical engineer Ronald Quartermaine was trusted by his servicemen friends to escort their wives to and from dances in their absence, a request routinely asked by military personnel of civilian friends according to Sally Sokoloff.<sup>54</sup> On one occasion, he was roughly treated by other military personnel who were resentful of his civilian status:

I have been knocked about, I mean really physically knocked about by some of these groups of sailors . . . Because I came out with a girl and they thought I was whatever I was. That wasn’t pleasant, but that was, I think, looking back on it, was understandable, you know. I didn’t blame them for that.<sup>55</sup>

Quartermaine ‘didn’t blame them’ for beating him, perhaps suggesting that he felt their actions were, if not justified, then at least ‘understandable’. They were, after all, fighting for Britain while he stayed at home, regularly attending social events. Perhaps they mistook him for a conscientious objector or assumed he was evading conscription; perhaps they were intoxicated. It was not only men in reserved occupations who experienced such hostility. Bevin Boys, who had been balloted to go down the mines upon their call-up to the services, were also viewed with suspicion for not being in uniform. Warwick Taylor recalled:

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<sup>53</sup> Rose, *Which People’s War?*, p.179.

<sup>54</sup> Sally Sokoloff, “How Are They at Home?” Community, State and Servicemen’s Wives in England, 1939-45’, *Women’s History Review*, 8:1 (1999), pp.27-52. Here p.42.

<sup>55</sup> Ronald Quartermaine, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 4 April 2013 (SOHC 050/28).

We did feel like outsiders, and mainly because there was a resentment because we weren't in uniform. And some people thought [we were] either deserters, draft dodgers, some people even thought we were conscientious objectors and of course local police would often challenge you, because you weren't in uniform. Everybody during the war virtually was in uniform of some sort. And this brought a bit of suspicion on you actually.<sup>56</sup>

Taylor's assertion that 'virtually everyone was in uniform' is obviously hyperbole, yet highlights his own feelings that he was in the minority having been denied military service. Singled out by his lack of uniform, he felt like an 'outsider', liable to be questioned by the police, mistaken for someone 'dodging' their duty or having an objection to the war. One of our pilot project interviewees, Bevin Boy Tom Myles, recounted the jibes aimed at him and a particularly unpleasant incident:

I remember actually in Falkirk, it was not very often but it did happen. There's a young able-bodied eighteen-year-old walking in the streets. 'Why are you no in the Army, why are you no doing this, why are you no doing that?' You know, and it did not sit well with me . . . But to be called a conscientious objector, and the Government made no move to advise people that this was happening you know, so folk would naturally did think . . . I just used to ignore it to be quite honest. I always find that's the best way. Just let them get on with it. Why get yourself into a kerfuffle you know and there's no real need for it, because they're just ignorant people. That's really basically what it is. There was one [episode] in actual fact. It was a hen's feather, and he came over and put it on the shoulder of my jacket. This was in the old New Market Street outside Aitken's brewery in Falkirk. I can see

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<sup>56</sup> Warwick Taylor, National Library of Wales, Wales at War Transcriptions, ex 2458/1.

and feel that whole episode to this day. And the man himself, I don't think he was even sober to be quite honest, but it was just the way he looked at me and did this stupid thing. He knew me vaguely and he must have been planning to do something like this, you know. What do you do? Just ignore it and walk away.<sup>57</sup>

Although Myles attempted to disregard the 'stupid' incident at the time, ignoring the drunk who had 'feathered' him and walking away without responding, the lingering significance of this particular memory decades later is highlighted by his assertion that 'I can see and feel that whole episode to this day.' The man who targeted Myles wished to insinuate he was a coward; something which Myles evidently was not, having been directed to civilian service by the state. Myles himself mentioned his 'utter disappointment' in being directed to the mines rather than being called up for military service and his discomfort at being labelled a shirker clearly still irked more than half a century later. While it was noted in the Commons that 'the white feather business is not overdone in this war as it was in the last war', this branding of civilian men as craven was not uncommon.<sup>58</sup> Sonya Rose notes: 'Frequently conscientious objectors were publicly shamed by being labelled "sissies", "pansies", and other terms denoting effeminacy and hinting that their sexuality was suspect.'<sup>59</sup> Such scorn however seems much more frequent in the recollections of Bevin Boys than reserved men. This perhaps reflects the Bevin Boys' mobile status as they were taken far from their homes to often close-knit communities where they were without the support of friends and neighbours, were not known and where questions may have been asked about their capacity to undertake this arduous labour. It may also reflect that they were directed workers, sent to a job which was far removed from the idealised glamour of the armed services that they had

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<sup>57</sup> Tom Myles, interviewed by Wendy Ugolini, 6 November 2008 (SOHC 050/02).

<sup>58</sup> HC Deb 19 March 1942, vol 378 cc1694-702.

<sup>59</sup> Rose, *Which People's War?*, p.175.

been expecting. As we shall see in chapter seven, this had a profound effect on the ways these men recalled their wartime service. Reserved men on the other hand generally, but not always, remained in their locale, known to their communities as working in a protected establishment, prevented by the state from enlisting.

The handing of white feathers to men not in uniform is more redolent of the First World War than the Second. Although Myles was our only interviewee to make reference to this, this was not exceptional. The presentation of feathers was happening in sufficient numbers to be mentioned in *People in Production*, a 1942 Mass Observation publication. These slurs aimed at civilian workers could have extreme consequences and a number of suicides had occurred in the wake of such incidents. Mass Observation noted that in an attempt to address this issue the government was considering developing a badge for those rejected from military service on medical grounds.<sup>60</sup> It was thought that men precluded from the forces ought, like the badged men of the First World War undertaking essential jobs, to have a visible signifier of their patriotism to ward off accusations of cowardice and shirking. Although badges were never implemented such a measure does suggest overt shaming of those out of uniform was more common than our interviewees experienced or acknowledged.

For some young reserved men, their attempts to enlist were troubling to their parents. Their fathers had generally been of age to serve in the First World War and felt the injustice of fighting a ‘war to end all wars’ only to have their sons face the same dangers just two decades later. John Stephenson, wartime railway worker, recalled:

My dad was a bit upset when I volunteered [unsuccessfully]. He said ‘you’re an idiot.’ I mean he’d done his time in the first war. But he didn’t want me to do any time in the second war. Well I don’t blame him because, yeah I

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<sup>60</sup> Mass Observation, *People in Production: An Enquiry into British War Production* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1942), p.85.

suppose he'd done his bit. He'd been wounded in the first war and he'd been gassed and God knows what.<sup>61</sup>

Wartime agricultural worker Alexander Ramage similarly recollected:

[I]n March 1944 I volunteered for air crew duty. But I was rejected. I was too young. I needed my father's permission. And it was not granted . . . Ah! I didn't know until after, it was long [time after], he was in Passchendaele. And he just didn't want to see me involved. He lost, he lost a lot.<sup>62</sup>

The shadow of the heavy death toll of the First World War became a recurrent feature of our interviewees' testimonies. While the figure of the absent father was not a key theme given that nearly all of our interviewees were born after 1918, the loss of uncles, brothers and cousins featured heavily. Charles Lamb, Dundee shipyard worker, stated that: 'If I had been called up I think I'd have broke [sic] my mother's heart. Because she lost two brothers in the First World War.'<sup>63</sup> Similarly, wartime farmer Robert Bell's Quaker pacifism was cemented by the loss of his cousin and brother in the First World War:

My parents were very sensitive at the time about the issue of the First World War, thinking it never should have happened and when news came through of all the killing fields. I was very conscious of it . . . Of course the most traumatic of all was first the death of [my] cousin, then in 1918 in April was the news that [my brother had] been killed . . . Now my parents, particularly my mother, I saw the scenes of the upset. That has had an enormous effect on my life right through time.<sup>64</sup>

It was perhaps surprising that the First World War did not feature even more prominently in interviewees' narratives. This undoubtedly reflects their relatively young age during the

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<sup>61</sup> John Stephenson, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 23 April 2013 (SOHC 050/39).

<sup>62</sup> Alexander Ramage, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 19 April 2013 (SOHC 050/14).

<sup>63</sup> Charles Lamb, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 3 April 2013 (SOHC 050/27).

<sup>64</sup> British Library, C900/06514, Robert Bell.

war. Indeed, none of those directly interviewed had any recollections of the earlier war with the oldest having been born in 1916. Older reserved men may have felt differently about the war. Indeed, Welsh teacher and poet Idris Davies was thirty four when the war broke out in 1939 and was thus in a reserved occupation. However, Davies does not seem to have been aware of this and he assumed he would be liable for conscription. Moreover, the First World War loomed large in his fears about the new conflict. In December 1939 he wrote in his diary:

The lovely weather continues, and I am very happy here. But now and again the thought of Khaki and Flanders mud, and filth, and death, can spoil one's peace of mind. I don't suppose I shall be here next summer. Anything can happen now. But I loathe and detest the thought of being dragooned in to the army, where life becomes so cheap and vulgar.<sup>65</sup>

Such use of imagery which invoked the death and destruction of the First World War was prominent in Davies' personal writing, highlighting his wish to avoid a repeat of the earlier carnage. Reflecting the changing attitudes of the nation as a whole, Davies nevertheless reluctantly came to see the necessity of warfare. In June 1940, following the fall of France, he recorded his changed feelings:

We shall have hell in this little island, but we shall fight on. I had my doubts a few days ago – I thought of all the tremendous odds we had to face, alone; but I know in my heart that I would rather die fighting the Boche than live and be his slave. We shall fight on, and damn them all. Let them all come, we shall give them hell for hell. We have fought tyrants before, and beat

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<sup>65</sup> National Library of Wales, MS 10812 D.

them down, and as long as Britain is Britain, we shall always triumph over tyrants, be they foreign or native.<sup>66</sup>

That this emotional journey took place so early in the war perhaps explains why our interviewee cohort did not articulate anything similar. They, generally, were young boys and teenagers when the war began making them, possibly, impervious to changing reactions to warfare. Indeed, by the time they approached, and reached, the age of military service the war had long been considered just and necessary, again making it understandable that they had few qualms about warfare.

Among our cohort as we have shown, there was a widespread, though not blanket, inclination to serve in the forces. Reserved men identified a range of factors that stimulated their desire and reflected their understanding of what it meant to be a man in this period. These included a deep-seated patriotism, the wish to don military uniform, taste adventure, do one's duty, guilt and the belief that one ought to at least try to join up.

### **‘You’re wasting my effing time...’: attempts to enlist in the military**

For many young men the internalised pressure to be doing something ‘more’ led them to attempt to enlist in the services. Many of our interviewees tried, with varying levels of success, to extricate themselves from their reserved jobs and get in to the military. This was often met with flat out refusal. Wartime Birmingham toolmaker Charles Hill recalled: ‘Most of us tried it in the early part of the war, and they said “where do you work?” “Oh sod off back to the Brooks Tools and don’t bother us down here, you can’t come.” So you didn’t bother going back.’<sup>67</sup> Frank Harvey similarly recalled:

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<sup>66</sup> National Library of Wales, MS 10812 D.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Hill (pseudonym), interviewed by Linsey Robb, 16 April 2013 (SOHC 050/37).

Well when I was eighteen . . . we went to a place in Manchester . . . This recruiting place. Waited about half a day in a queue. Went up to the counter in the RAF and he just said ‘where do you work?’ I said ‘Churchill Machine Tool.’ He said ‘what are you doing here?’ and he used a rather rude word and told me to go away. He said, ‘you’re wasting my effing time! Go away.’ Tore it up, threw it in the air. ‘Next!’<sup>68</sup>

For Hill and Harvey one attempt was sufficient to deter them from trying again. Moreover, it appeased their longing for military service and, perhaps, assuaged their vulnerable sense of manhood. However, others tried multiple times, often in an increasingly desperate fashion, to enlist. Stephen Smith, a wartime engineer, recalled:

I was determined to leave ‘cos I wanted to get into the forces . . . I joined the Royal Navy. I joined the Royal Air Force. Soon as you produced your card with the ‘Reserved Occupation’, they didn’t want to know . . . I tried several times. Yeah and I remember with the, I forget which armed force it was, I know, I thought I’d actually done it, because I got as far as having a medical, and I thought, ‘oh I’m not going to stop there.’ And then you moved up the line, you know, you was all in these mass medicals, and the guy said ‘you, you, you can leave.’ He said, ‘you’re Reserved Occupation’, so I was determined, I was determined to do what I could to get out but, and I tried lot, I tried several times in Croydon. But each time the dreaded Essential Works Order came along and stopped it.<sup>69</sup>

That Smith attempted to enlist in several different services suggests military enlistment in any guise was the ultimate goal.

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<sup>68</sup> Frank Harvey, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 27 March 2013 (SOHC 050/23).

<sup>69</sup> Stephen Smith (pseudonym), interviewed by Linsey Robb, 19 February 2013 (SOHC 050/11).

Yet despite the Schedule preventing them from volunteering, there were authorised ways for men to leave reserved occupations. From October 1941, as noted in chapter two, reserved men were permitted, if they fulfilled the entrance requirements, to join RAF flight crew, or less commonly serve on board submarines. It was also possible for reserved men to enlist in the services in their skilled trade capacity if there was demand. These were routes a small minority of our interviewees took, including Cecil Clements who worked as a draughtsman for a central London ordnance company. Following bomb damage to the factory the entire production was moved by the Ministry of Defence to Wells in Somerset to ensure production continued. Clements found Wells to be highly enjoyable: ‘it was great. What a good life considering the lives of other people at that time.’<sup>70</sup> His comfort in the cathedral city, as well as abundant amounts of tennis, became a recurring theme in his interview: ‘[I]t was good fun dare I say it? But it was good fun. And I felt a bit guilty . . . I began to think “well, we’re all doing this work and it’s a comfortable life” . . . I enjoyed my work but I ought to be in the forces really.’<sup>71</sup> Clements repeatedly referred to his belief that he should be in uniform, a feeling which was only made stronger by his enjoyment of tennis in beautiful surroundings. Ultimately, after a year of trying, he was accepted in to the RAF as a navigator in 1942. He spent the majority of his time in the military in Canada without seeing active service. Clements’ squadron were readying themselves for war in the Far East when America’s use of the atomic bomb ended the war against Japan. Speaking of his lack of action, he noted: ‘I’m not too worried. I mean, that’s what we were destined for, as I say, particularly when they told us we were going to Japan, but the bomb fell . . . We didn’t even start to go over. The war was over, basically, so we were demobbed.’<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, Clements attained ‘composure’ from the knowledge that he had served and had ‘done his bit’ as he

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<sup>70</sup> Cecil Clements, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 16 May 2013 (SOHC 050/51).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

understood it. That the war ended before he could put his skills to the test in a military capacity could not be helped.

Enlistment was not just an issue of persuading the state to release a worker from essential work however; it was also crucial to convince an employer. Stephen Smith recalled his negotiations with his when trying to secure his release so that he could join the Merchant Navy:

But quite by chance I was reading the newspaper at work, and it's funny how it happens, and there was an advert and I should have been wary at the time, because this little advert thing said that the Merchant Navy would take Reserved Occupation engineers if they could negotiate their own release. Now why would they do that? [Pause] I think it was because they was losing so many engineers, they were getting desperate . . . I was lucky that the management side of the company was not near where I was working, you know, the management was at Wimbledon, and we was at Streatham. So I took my morning or afternoon off from work and went up to the Merchant Navy pool to get things going . . . It was easier than what I thought it was going to be. The firm was good to me . . . They realised that I was pretty desperate to go, so you know, they said 'okay.'<sup>73</sup>

While Smith was ultimately successful, other employers were less amenable to losing their skilled workers. As we saw in chapter two, a Mass Observation diarist noted that 'very few firms will release their men.'<sup>74</sup> Miner William Ramage, who repeatedly attempted to enlist and came very close to joining the RAF, recalled just such issues:

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<sup>73</sup> Stephen Smith (pseudonym), interviewed by Linsey Robb, 19 February 2013 (SOHC 050/11).

<sup>74</sup> MOA D5039.1. Diary for June 1941.

I wanted to join air crew too but they wouldn't let me go. And at the finish we did get, allow us to go for testing. At the music hall in George Street [Edinburgh]. That was the big recruiting place. Went there, oh, it wasnae just one interview, three or four interviews, passed everything. They asked me to go to Broughton High School in Edinburgh for night classes to bring forward my maths. I was good at maths. Yes, I passed it, then I got a short letter, 'William Ramage, you are accepted, AC2.' That was aircraft, second class. Everybody that went into the Air Force was AC2. 'To be trained for FLTENG', flight engineer. I was delighted. I was delighted. After about four weeks, three weeks, there was no sign o' my call up papers . . . I wrote a rude letter to them asking why. Got a very quick letter back, 'services no longer required.' They had got in touch wi' the manager o' the mine I was working and asked if I could be released from what I was doing and join the Air Force, I was to go for air crew. He said 'no, no, I need him here', so I was turned down.<sup>75</sup>

His emphatic 'delight' in being accepted in to the RAF and his subsequent continued attempts to enlist highlight just how strongly the desire to be in uniform was for many young men. Indeed, Ramage called his time out of uniform 'sore to bear'. He nevertheless continued to attempt to enlist in the military and was eventually accepted into the army just as the war ended.

While there were ways to leave reserved occupations lawfully, awareness that men were continually being refused entry into the services because of their essential work led others to resort to cunning invention. Miner Henry Barrett recalled:

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<sup>75</sup> William Ramage, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 29 April 2013 (SOHC 050/043).

I'll put it bluntly I fiddled my way out of the coal mine and in to the Merchant Navy . . . I suffer from a mastoid. One ear was cut away as a boy . . . Going down the coalmine the ears click and things like that, going down the pit. Pithead baths, the heat, you go home on the bike freezing cold and the catarrh and I played on that. I was deaf. Only one ear but that was affecting my other ear so I eventually went to Bath Infirmary and they told me to pack the coalmines in. Which I'd deliberately done. If I'd wanted to stop there I would have stopped there. I was a single man and everyone else was away. All dressed up in uniform and everything else. I was a single man. Young. So I seen an advertisement in the *South Wales Echo* for firemen/trimmers [to work in the engine rooms] at Cardiff docks, a well noted place and I done a fortnight's training there and went away to sea.<sup>76</sup>

The strong lure of 'dressing up' in uniform once again becomes apparent as an incentive for enlistment. It is also notable that Barrett emphasised his youthfulness and single status, suggesting he felt his lack of familial ties made him ideally suited for the dangerous life at sea. Others went to even more extreme lengths to avoid civilian service. Some civilian men were even willing to face prison to achieve their ultimate goal. Wartime miner Thomas Chadwick repeatedly attempted to join the Merchant Navy:

But I wanted to join up. I wanted to be in the thick of it. It sounds crazy . . . Well I ran away that many times to join the Merchant Navy, I was arrested in London, I was arrested at Southampton, I was arrested at Fleetwood with the trawlers. It got so bad that the chief constable, Mr Panfrey, said he'd better things to do than keep handling me, which I'll never forget. In later years I got to know him and he said 'you were a proper pain in them days

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<sup>76</sup> IWM SA, 16733, Henry Barrett, reel 2, 7 February 1996.

but we realised what it was, you were young.’ The pit, it was stupid really. I used to go and say to the boss ‘sack me or tell them I’m no good at what I’m doing.’ And this went on and on until I went to court . . . I was absent from the coal mining industry . . . which was a very severe civilian offence. One of vital importance. He [the judge] said ‘at his age no man is that important in any industry and if he’s so keen for god sake let him go.’ . . . I’ve made it, I’ve cracked it. I’m going. I came home from work one day and the beautiful buff envelope was on the mantelpiece.<sup>77</sup>

That Chadwick’s repeated attempts to leave the mines centred not on the military but on the Merchant Navy highlights the increased status of that service in wartime. Moreover, Chadwick’s reference to the ‘beautiful buff envelope’, as well as his willingness to risk prison, highlights just how prized being ‘in the thick of it’ had become. Indeed, extreme tales of attempting to enlist were fairly common highlighting how, for many young reserved men, the blow to their masculine subjectivities was acutely felt.

One of the only ways to become de-reserved was to get dismissed, no easy task when the Essential Work Order forbade this for all but gross misconduct. However, some young men tried. Robert Alexander, apprentice electrician, recalled in 2001:

I had a good apprenticeship and I said, ‘I don’t like this I’m going to get in the Navy.’ I tried to join up at sixteen. My mother said ‘if you’re going to mither me, I’ll let you go, you know, under protest’ so I had to go to a tribunal in Manchester which was okay. Three chaps . . . they explained they’d need men like me once the war was over. They’d have lost so many tradesmen and men that they’d be relying on people like me to be qualified tradesmen when the war was finished. I said ‘I want to go to the Navy.’

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<sup>77</sup> IWM SA, 16593, Thomas Chadwick, reel 1, 1996 (day unspecified).

They refused me. So I went back to the works and got fired. That was the only way to do it. I got sacked. Instead of wiring the vans up I'd go wandering off and leave them . . . I wanted in the Navy so I got fired.<sup>78</sup>

The inexorable pull of military service felt by many young men once again becomes apparent. Even though Alexander was made explicitly aware of the importance of his civilian occupation he instead sought to enlist in the Navy, an ambition he ultimately fulfilled.

Midlothian miner William Ramage tried a similarly nefarious route to enlistment:

The war was just coming to an end when I went into the Army. And I'd been trying and trying and they wouldn't take me because of my employment. Eventually I went into rebellion . . . I stopped work. I'd had a bad incident underground. The deputy in charge treated me very badly, very badly and when I came up that day, I says 'well, that's it, I'm no' going back.' . . . So I didn't go back. I went to see the manager, I says 'if you give me the sack, I can go where I want.' 'Oh no', he says, 'I'm needing you here.' I went to see the manager o' the Labour Exchange in Dalkeith . . . [H]e says 'you know, of course, if you don't work, you won't [get] unemployment benefit.' I says 'I know that sir', but I stopped work and I don't know how my father and mother suffered it, but I was idle for four, about four weeks. Then a letter came through the door, it was Mr Wilson that had signed it . . . 'William Ramage, you're required to report to Gordon Barracks, Aberdeen for military service.' Oh dear, my heart surged . . . I couldn't be, you wouldn't believe the eruption that took place in my heart.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> IWM SA, 21647, Robert John Alexander, reel 1, 7 June 2001.

<sup>79</sup> William Ramage, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 29 April 2013 (SOHC 050/43).

The poetic language used by Ramage to describe how he felt at finally being able to fulfil his ambition of joining the military, his heart surging and erupting with elation, as well as his dramatic leap from the chair as he said the word ‘surged’, emphasises his sheer joy and relief. Similarly, his willingness to forego his wages for several weeks again underlines how important a goal military service was. Cumulatively, these examples highlight just how strongly desired a role in the forces was for so many young civilian men and, therefore, how central it was to their masculine sense of self.

### **‘The making of me’: experiences in the military**

Those who managed to escape their reserved occupations and fulfil their desire to enlist were often extremely emphatic about their experiences, showing vast amounts of pride in their military achievements which were rarely mirrored in discussions of their civilian work. Walker Leith, who had been a telephone engineer before joining the army in the Royal Signals and being posted overseas in 1944, was effusive about his time in the military:

Well I think it was a terrific experience. It was, in a sense, the making of me as an individual. You felt that the experience was so, so unique. I mean I have to put it in the context that I wasn’t really in a real *battle* situation. In my occupation as Royal Signals, I just was providing communications . . . I went to France about six weeks after the initial landings on the sixth of June . . . And you had to cannibalise all the teleprinters and the equipment that came in, to make up working models. And it was quite a problem because you weren’t a big unit. I was on my own virtually. As a consequence I was working night and day. Just trying to get enough equipment going so that

they could keep the communications to-ing and fro-ing. It was quite, it was, I'll never forget! It was that arduous.<sup>80</sup>

While Leith acknowledges that he never saw combat this is irrelevant to him and he is nevertheless able to achieve narrative composure: he was in uniform, in France, as part of the liberating army, something which he will 'never forget' and which was 'a terrific experience'. His positive recollections of his martial activity can be set within a contemporary context which continually celebrates and praises the military experiences of the Second World War. Television programmes and films about the war abound in Western culture. In 2014, a year where popular culture was focused primarily on the centenary of the First World War, these have included *The Last Heroes* (Channel 4, 2014), *Generation War* (BBC, 2014), *The Monuments Men* (Dir. George Clooney, 2014), *Fury* (Dir. David Ayer, 2014) and *Unbroken* (Dir. Angelina Jolie, 2014). Public interest in the conflict shows no signs of abating. Such emphasis reinforces the notion that the depictions shown are worthy of both note and praise. As will be seen in chapter seven, civilian men are largely absent from this persistent cultural focus. Perhaps one of the reasons those who joined the military can so easily discuss their experiences is that there is a widely known cultural language to do so. Indeed, Leith did not even feel the need to mention that 'the sixth of June' was D-Day, assuming correctly that the interviewer would know the significance of the date. RAF pilot Ronald Tonge, who had previously been reserved as a telephone engineer, was similarly expansive about his experiences: 'I wouldn't have missed it. I think it was the most exciting part . . . Flying is great.'<sup>81</sup> Tonge emphasised the large numbers lost in training: 'there wasn't one course without a fatality, we lost two. Training was on the brink.' He never saw active service, instead serving his time training in South Africa. His emphasis on the danger of the

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<sup>80</sup> Walker Leith, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 2 April 2013 (SOHC 050/26).

<sup>81</sup> Ronald Tonge, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 28 March 2013 (SOHC 050/24).

training suggests that he felt he had to emphasise his military, and perhaps masculine, credentials as he did not achieve the apogee of battle experience. Midlothian miner William Ramage, was also characteristically enthusiastic in describing his own experiences of the military:

So I went up to Aberdeen. It was like playing, it was easy. The Army was easy and I was good at it . . . The Army was wonderful wi' these lads, and of course the training, well, it was stiff but it was nothing to me, I mean, in the mines, I could handle anything, so I did my training . . . We went to Germany. Oh, I loved it. I just loved it.<sup>82</sup>

Ramage's daughter Hilde was in the room throughout the interview. When her father got very enthusiastic about his military service she interrupted to remind him, affectionately, that he had never actually fought but instead had been stationed in Germany after the war had ended. Ramage retorted 'I know that, but then I, on the other hand, I was prepared to take the chance on the front line. I'm prepared to take the chance.'<sup>83</sup> His slip into the present tense illustrates the ongoing pleasure he derives from achieving his desire to get into uniform, albeit not actual combat. Of our interviewees who joined the military, none in fact saw active combat. Some were in support or trade roles while others were simply called-up or volunteered too late to be deployed. John Dickson, who worked in shipbuilding before joining the RAF, recalled that 'it was May [1945] when we sailed. And we sailed from the Clyde to South Africa. So I had twelve months in South Africa. Which was pretty tough! We ran out of milk chocolate one day!'<sup>84</sup> Similarly, Cecil Clements, who felt personally compelled to enlist because he was enjoying playing tennis too much in Somerset, stated: 'But it was, yeah, was great. And I thoroughly, absolutely thoroughly enjoyed my three years

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<sup>82</sup> William Ramage, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 29 April 2013 (SOHC 050/043).

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> John Dickson, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 21 May 2013 (SOHC 050/53).

in the RAF training to be a navigator. Because I never got on operations.’<sup>85</sup> This lack of battle experience perhaps reflects a bias in our cohort and it is feasible that had they seen violence and death this would colour both their memories of their army experience and their remembered desire to rush to the services from the relative safety of a reserved occupation.

### **‘I’m not a pacifist but...’: disinterest in military life**

While the ideal of the ‘soldier hero’ was culturally pervasive in wartime Britain, it made little impact on some men’s lives. Twenty eight of our interviewees, exactly half, did not attempt to enlist in the services. Some were comfortable with their civilian status, accepting that the state knew best how to deploy manpower. Willie Dewar, who worked at North British Locomotive in Glasgow, recalled somewhat resignedly:

[I] just felt you did your job and that was the job you would do. If you were called up you would just have done another job. There was no feeling that I should have been in the Army or I should have done this. You had a job to do, you did it and everybody was quite happy . . . [I]f you were called up you were quite happy. You could have volunteered, you might have not got away but the fact was you were doing a job to help the war effort and you were quite happy to do that.<sup>86</sup>

The overriding tone of this excerpt is that he passively accepted what the state dictated: either being directed into the services or, as he was, retained in reserved occupations. Either course would have suited him; he was ‘happy’ to help the war effort in whichever way the authorities considered most useful. Alternatively, by positioning himself as a passive tool of

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<sup>85</sup> Cecil Clements, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 16 May 2013 (SOHC 050/51).

<sup>86</sup> Willie Dewar, interviewed by Arthur McIvor, 9 December 2008 (SOHC 050/04).

the state he could abdicate responsibility for his own wartime agency, fending off cultural pressures to enlist.

Some interviewees were more emphatic, stating that they were pleased not to have been called up. When asked how he felt about his friends being away in the army, wartime railway worker Daniel Donovan simply responded that ‘I was glad it wasn’t me’, highlighting that he too had no compunction or desire to enlist.<sup>87</sup> For some, their relief at being granted reserved status was palpable. Gregory Fowler, wartime telephone engineer, noted:

Well I didn’t realise that it was a reserved employ, occupation, until I, at eighteen, went to register for national service. And then told I was. [I was] not allowed to be called up until I was twenty-one. I suppose a sense of relief to some extent . . . because it wasn’t a safe occupation being in the forces.

If I had been called up at eighteen, as I would have been, I would have just have been in time for D-Day.<sup>88</sup>

Others felt similarly fortunate, at least in retrospect, to have avoided service and spared the outright horrors of warfare. Timothy Brown, wartime munitions worker in Newcastle, declared the Navy did him a ‘good turn’ by declining him. When asked to expand on this statement he asserted: ‘Well, I might not be here, would I? . . . You never know, that was your luck of the draw.’<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Frank Blincow, wartime draughtsman, stated: ‘I mean, now I’m grateful that I never did go into the air force. Because the odds are I wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you . . . Well, you know what a “tail end Charlie” was.’<sup>90</sup> This was common slang for the rear gunner in an aircraft who, given his vulnerable position in the rear of the aeroplane, was isolated from the rest of the crew had a notoriously short lifespan.

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<sup>87</sup> Daniel Donovan, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 21 March 2013 (SOHC 050/16).

<sup>88</sup> Gregory Fowler (pseudonym), interviewed by Linsey Robb, 12 April 2013 (SOHC 050/34).

<sup>89</sup> Timothy Brown (pseudonym), interviewed by Linsey Robb, 8 April 2013 (SOHC 050/30).

<sup>90</sup> Frank Blincow, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 30 May 2013 (SOHC 050/56).

This was a position many were keen to avoid.<sup>91</sup>

Reserved status could provide a welcome means of evading military service. Poet and wartime AFS (Auxiliary Fire Service) firemen Stephen Spender noted in a 1990 interview with the Imperial War Museum:

I mean I'm not a pacifist but I didn't really want to be involved in killing people. Sufficiently pacifist for that. I suppose I didn't want to be killed either. I suppose I wanted to, I mean the war did offer honourable ways of being able to carry on with the work you believed was your vocation and not being sort of cowardly.<sup>92</sup>

While conscientious objection is, in scholarly works and the public imagination, popularly connected with the First World War, 61,000 men declared themselves conscientious objectors between 1939 and 1945. This was a significant increase from the 16,000 who had done so in the First World War.<sup>93</sup> Spender mentions the 'honourable ways' of avoiding military service suggesting some, at least, felt that non-military service was preferable to life in the forces.<sup>94</sup> Some of our interviewees reported similarly pacifist sentiments. Charles Lamb, Dundee shipyard worker, was resolute in his abhorrence of guns: 'I wasna in the Home Guard, I refused to handle a rifle, I was in the fire watching . . . Well, [a rifle] kills people! . . . You can kill enough people with a rifle, aye, I wasna going to shoot anybody.'<sup>95</sup> Similarly, when Manchester turner George Dean was asked how he felt about being in a reserved occupation he responded:

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<sup>91</sup> Francis, *The Flyer*, pp.42-3.

<sup>92</sup> IWM SA, 11627, Stephen Spender, reel 1, 1990 (day unspecified).

<sup>93</sup> Rose, *Which People's War?*, p.171. Robert S. W. Pollard, 'Conscientious Objectors in Great Britain and the Dominions' in *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law*, 28:3/4 (1946), pp.72-82; Hazel Nicholson, 'A Disputed Identity: Women Conscientious Objectors in Second World War Britain' in *Twentieth Century British History*, 18:4 (2007), pp.409-28.

<sup>94</sup> For a discussion of the multiple constructions of conscientious objector identity in the First World War, including the 'honourable man' who embodied admirable qualities such as self-discipline and commitment, see Lois Bibbings, *Telling Tales About Men: Conceptions of Conscientious Objectors to Military Service During the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp.195-229.

<sup>95</sup> Charles Lamb, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 3 April 2013 (SOHC 050/27).

Didn't bother me . . . No I was 'appy where I was . . . I don't ever think if they'd 'ave given me a gun I'd 'ave shot anybody . . . I didn't want to be a soldier, no. I couldn't see any sense in it, honest . . . It's all right saying 'King and Country' and all that, but to me, it don't wash.<sup>96</sup>

Despite its prevalence in both our interviews and in wartime society, military uniform was not universally desired. Even within our youthful group of interviewees a significant number expressed no desire to enlist.

Some men, of course, sought to avoid military service and enjoyed the relative safety and security of a reserved occupation. Nick Metson, interviewed by the British Library in 1999, for example, told the following tale:

I didn't want to go in the West Kents because the chap I was working with he'd been in the West Kents and he used to regale me with tale[s of] Ypres and Cambrai where he'd been and the mud and the rats and one thing and another. I thought 'I don't want none of that lark' so I was trying to get in to munitions so then you'd be on a reserved occupation you see. A lot safer and a lot more money attached to it. I wrote to her [a girlfriend in Sheffield] and asked if there was any chance of coming up there and she wrote back saying 'yes, mum says there's a spare room', she said 'and you can come up and stay with us. There's plenty of work.' So I packed my bags and went off up to Sheffield. And I went down to the Labour Exchange and straight [away] they gave me a yellow card and said 'there you are, Metro-Vickers.' They wanted a lot of people down there. Obviously I was an electrician so I was just right. So I went down there and got a job, armature winding. Winding the armatures for to turn the

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<sup>96</sup> George Dean, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 28 March 2013 (SOHC 050/25).

turret round in the tanks they were making so I thought right I'm in and that was fine. Next thing was doom and destruction. A letter came on a Thursday night when I came home from work. It was from my mother giving me my call-up papers which had arrived that day.<sup>97</sup>

Metson was unusual in his openness about avoiding military service, especially in identifying such selfish motives as money and self-preservation. He was almost certainly in the extreme minority. Others sought reserved status because of their anti-war beliefs. Frank Chapple, for example, got work along with other fellow communists as an electrician in the London docks.<sup>98</sup> However, despite the general acceptance of the necessity of reserved occupations there was a persistent underlying suggestion of cowardice, namely that great swathes of men were actively seeking a reserved job to avoid military service. As we saw in chapter two, John Profumo stated in the Commons in November 1941 that there were men who 'secured for themselves cushion-seated jobs' through either contrivance or influence and urged the Ministry of Labour to instigate an inquiry to stop this 'disgraceful' behaviour.<sup>99</sup> The state did monitor the numbers of men passing from non-essential jobs in to reserved occupations. In 1941, for example, around 6000 men a month did so.<sup>100</sup> However, the number of these men who were 'legitimately' transferring to meet the growing demand for war materials and essential services, as encouraged by the state, and those that might be deliberately using this as a premise to avoid conscription is not known. Nevertheless, the numbers represented only a tiny fraction of the millions who were in reserved occupations. Such low opinions of reserved men, although rare, also found parallel in the reminiscences of some reserved men themselves. Albert Bennett, for example, who was a reserved worker at the Rolls Royce Aircraft Factory in Crewe, noted:

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<sup>97</sup> British Library, C900/07557-07558 C1, Nick Metson.

<sup>98</sup> Frank Chapple, *Sparks Fly! A Trade Union Life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1984), p.34.

<sup>99</sup> HC Deb, 13 November 1941 vol 376 cc74-148.

<sup>100</sup> National Archives, LAB 6/164.

[W]ith the influx of the dodging of military service we had a lot of people coming in to do semi-skilled work . . . The Battle of Britain was coming up so it was a reserved occupation, a very much reserved occupation. That was one of the things that upset me most of all. People were coming off a second-hand stall or a cheese stall behind the market and coming in . . . and getting a blue collar or a white collar and doing supervisory work which was a bit hard to take for what you might call a reasonably standard engineer. I tried to get away from the works. I tried to get away and I volunteered three times for the Navy.<sup>101</sup>

Bennett attacked those ‘dodging military service’ in two key ways. Not only were they army dodgers, and so emasculated cowards, but they were also unskilled traders rather than skilled craftsmen like him. Gordon Tack, apprentice boilermaker in Plymouth, similarly felt those he worked alongside were cowardly: ‘I didn’t want to stay there. Didn’t want [to] work in the dockyard or with the people that were in it. You only had to have an aeroplane appear within ten miles of the place and the whole workforce disappeared down the shelters.’<sup>102</sup> Again the suggestion of cowardice among the male civilian population is clear. However, strikingly, both of these men were keen to escape their reserved status and enter the military. As such their opinions may reflect their internalised notions of what constituted appropriate male behaviour, as well as their own fears about the assumptions made about their masculine status, rather than accurate representations of the fortitude of Britain’s civilian workforce.

### **‘We did something to stop the Germans’: valuing contributions to the war effort**

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<sup>101</sup> IWM SA, 30023, Albert Bennett, reel 1, February 2004.

<sup>102</sup> IWM SA, 16699, Gordon Hugh Tack, reel 1, 1996 (day unspecified).

As we have seen, a hierarchy of value existed in wartime with the military man at the top. There was, however, a marked variation in how civilian working men positioned themselves in wartime and in their interview narratives with regards to their responses to their reserved status. Some felt frustrated that their manhood had been potentially diminished because they were not in uniform. Others transmitted a remarkable degree of comfort with their reserved identities, having little sense of their masculinity being fundamentally challenged. Various reasons, including apathy, acceptance, relief, pacifism, money and self-preservation, explain why half our interviewees did not attempt to enlist. In order to achieve narrative composure, interviewees chose from a range of masculine identities when talking about their reserved status. Men across the spectrum of responses to their retention on the home front often referred to the importance of their work to the war effort. Railwayman Jim Lister, for example, who had tried unsuccessfully to get into the services, recalled: ‘Well if there was nobody shifting munitions and coal and what have you, you’re not going to be much up to the war effort.’<sup>103</sup> Engineering draughtsman Willie Dewar, who had not attempted to join the services, asserted: ‘It was more important to get the equipment than it was to get the fighting people.’<sup>104</sup> Similarly, Manchester tool maker Frank Harvey, who had tried once unsuccessfully to join the forces, stated:

Without the engines which we were on, it was the machine tools that made the Spitfire engines, we wouldn’t have done anything, you know . . . Without doing it I don’t think we’d have won the war, because it’s no use you having aircraft if they’ve no engines in them.<sup>105</sup>

Many men derived satisfaction from their contributions to the overall war machine. Indeed, a significant number of the interviewees who espoused such ideas did not try to enlist in the

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<sup>103</sup> Jim Lister, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 19 April 2014 (SOHC 050/38).

<sup>104</sup> Willie Dewar, interviewed by Arthur McIvor, 9 December 2008 (SOHC 050/04).

<sup>105</sup> Frank Harvey, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 27 March 2013 (SOHC 050/23).

military. When asked how he felt about being reserved Harry McGregor, who did not try to leave his reserved employment at St Rollox railway works, commented: 'it was a job you'd do and that was it. You're reserved occupation so you just had to do what you could do for the war effort, you know, and that was it'. He continued: 'I *preferred* to be in a reserved occupation.'<sup>106</sup> A permutation of this was a sense that skills were required after the war for reconstruction, and thus craft apprenticeships had to be finished and any ambitions to be in uniform curtailed.<sup>107</sup>

In their oral testimonies, many male veterans also consciously endeavoured to associate themselves with the war effort, often emphasising that they had been in war zones facing bombing raids. When asked how he felt about being in a reserved occupation Clydebank draughtsman Roy Miller retorted 'We were bombed. I felt, well, just as much involved as the, and particularly people in London, people in London had a terrible time during the war. So there was no feeling that you weren't doing your bit.'<sup>108</sup> Miller's family were bombed out of their home during the Clydebank Blitz in March 1941, losing several neighbours and most of their possessions as well as resulting in a lengthy hospital stay for Miller's father. Miller, who did not leave his reserved work to join the services, evidently felt he was as much in danger as a soldier and that his contribution should not be considered lesser for being civilian. Similarly, proximity to the means of waging war, including the production of tanks, planes and munitions, was important in the construction of masculinity among reserved workers. Recurring motifs in our interviews were Dunkirk, spitfires and hurricanes, Bletchley Park, Atlantic convoys, Sicily landings, D-Day and Mulberry harbours. The interviewees' masculinity was bolstered through direct association with the mission of war; they saw themselves as critical cogs in the machine of modern warfare where

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<sup>106</sup> Harry McGregor, interviewed by Arthur McIvor, 13 July 2009 (SOHC 050/06). Interviewee's emphasis.

<sup>107</sup> IWM SA, 21647, Robert John Alexander, reel 1, 7 June 2001.

<sup>108</sup> Roy Miller, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 27 February 2013 (SOHC 050/13).

victory depended as much upon producing the goods as shooting the weapons. Respondents clearly found composure in this kind of narrative which positioned them as playing an important and vital role in the war. Some men understood that they were ‘doing their bit’ in civilian clothes: they were reserved because their work was vital to the war effort. Alexander Davidson, who remained at a boat building firm in Portsmouth, stated:

We didn’t mind really because we were doing a job for the Admiralty. It was a job that had to be done during the war. It was no good having sailors if you’d got nothing to sail them in, if you hadn’t got any boats. So it was Admiralty work we were on, so we were connected very closely with the services really . . . We felt we were part, we were part of the war effort, that’s what it was really. You know, same as making guns or something else, and you weren’t actually firing them but you were making them.<sup>109</sup>

Davidson’s work in naval shipyards, unlike some other reserved occupations, was explicitly linked to the military, making it unsurprising that he felt himself to be intimately connected to Britain’s war effort. Other interviewees were similarly keen to stress the part they, and their firms, had played in key wartime events. Three interviewees were at pains to stress they had been involved, admittedly unwittingly, in the construction of the ingenious portable temporary harbours, known as Mulberry Harbours, used in the D-Day landings. Roger Major described his role in this feat of engineering. He stated:

Found out later it was for making the Mulberry Harbours for D-Day. They were made in sections, right the way down the coast. And then they were put together in Devon and then floated across. And they were a godsend. That was the essential part of D-Day. The Mulberry Harbours. And they

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<sup>109</sup> Alexander Davidson, interviewed by Linsey Robb 10 April 2013 (SOHC 050/32).

were all welded, you know and he, I mean we didn't know it was only after the war that we realised it, what the job was.<sup>110</sup>

Being so closely involved in an essential part of the military war effort allowed these men to feel they had truly contributed to victory. As George Cross, employed building rolling stock, noted when asked if he felt part of the war effort: 'Oh no doubt about it, no doubt about it, no doubt about it. We felt it and we got that quite often. Well, maybe some dignitary came to have a look around and, you know, and we got that impression that we were well thought of . . . You look on it as pride that we did something to stop the Germans.'<sup>111</sup> When colleagues tried to join up, Cross recalled them being told: 'Back, back, back to work . . . We need you as much as we need the servicemen.'<sup>112</sup> Moreover, reserved status itself could also become a badge of honour. Phillip Rogers, who worked in coal mining in wartime, used his reserved occupation status to prove his worth on the home front: 'I wouldn't have been in a reserved occupation I suppose if it wasn't necessary. Somebody had to do it.'<sup>113</sup> Similar pride drawn from reserved occupation status was seen in a Mass Observation industrial survey completed in 1942. Among other issues the survey asked industrial workers if they felt their work was important to the war effort. Many responded that it was, giving their reserved status as proof of their importance and necessity.<sup>114</sup>

Furthermore, where large numbers of men were concentrated in particular working communities such as coal mines, shipyards, iron and steel works and industrial estates (like Hillington in Glasgow, Trafford Park in Manchester and the Great West Road in London), there was a shared wartime experience: it was the norm rather than the exception to be a civilian male worker. When asked if he ever thought of joining the armed services Fred

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<sup>110</sup> Roger Major (pseudonym) interviewed by Linsey Robb, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2013 (SOHC 050/21).

<sup>111</sup> George Cross, interviewed by Wendy Ugolini, 6 November 2008 (SOHC 050/03).

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Phillip Rogers (pseudonym), interviewed by Linsey Robb, 19 March 2013 (SOHC 050/15).

<sup>114</sup> MOAidris, TC 75-2-E. Industrial Survey 1941-1942 Questionnaire.

Millican, who worked in the huge Vickers-Armstrong factory in Tyneside which employed thousands in wartime, responded: 'By and large my immediate friends were all working in Vickers. So I suppose that was it. You just assumed you weren't going to go.'<sup>115</sup> The presence of these other reserved men validated Millican's own existence on the home front by normalising his absence from the military. Similarly, shipbuilding draughtsman Roy Miller recalled: 'nearly all my pals in Clydeside were in reserved occupations of one kind or another.'<sup>116</sup> In these places there was little sense of being outsiders or different as the shared experience was of war work.<sup>117</sup> For those surrounded by other reserved occupation workers there seems to be little sense of emasculation. Working class men employed in heavy industry and other war-related work could draw upon their identification as essential war workers and their close association with total war to bolster their sense of manliness.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that, for our interview cohort at least, the lure of the armed forces was powerful. Out of fifty six men interviewed exactly half attempted to enlist, often in increasingly inventive and desperate ways. Military service was a highly prized goal for lots of young men during the Second World War. While many, if not most, understood the importance of their civilian work, individually a number of our interviewees felt as if they should do something 'more', highlighting an obvious hierarchy of contributions to the war effort. That they were, more often than not, denied this chance resulted in strong emotions which clearly resonated over half a century later. Men described themselves as 'stuck', 'robbed' and 'nobodies' making their opinions of their own, ultimately vital, contributions to the war effort abundantly clear. However, we must avoid simple dichotomies and the tempting ease

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<sup>115</sup> Fred Millican, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 26 March 2013 (SOHC 050/20).

<sup>116</sup> Roy Miller, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 27 February 2013 (SOHC 050/13).

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, Frank Harvey, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 27 March 2013 (SOHC 050/23); Eddie Munday, <http://www.unionhistory.info/workerswar/voices.php> Accessed 7 October 2014.

of categorising these men as either desperate to stay or eager to leave. While half of our young cohort of interviewees attempted to enlist, the majority were not driven by tub-thumping jingoism. Some were certainly desperate to serve in the forces as an end in itself, some resorting to extreme measures in order to fulfil this goal. However, many others felt they had to try to get in to uniform to preserve their masculine sense of self, attempting to enlist when they had no real desire to be in uniform or see battle. Moreover, some men were comfortable with their reserved status. The reasons for this were diffuse. Some had an abhorrence of violence, often a result of their knowledge of the First World War. Others understood that their jobs were necessary, that they were providing the essential goods and services required to survive and win a protracted total war. Some were simply apathetic, happy to be sent wherever the state felt their services were best needed. Similarly, many drew succour from knowing their job ultimately aided the war effort. The reactions to their reserved status of our interviewees, mainly single men who were aged between eighteen and twenty eight at the end of the war, therefore, represent a broad and complex spectrum of reactions to warfare.