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Title

To the Edge and Back: The New Spirit of Adventure among Danish Expeditionary Forces

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Abstract

If “to travel is to live”, as Hans Christian Andersen wrote once upon a time, what are we then to make of the travelling at stake when ‘our troops’ deploy to distant war zones? Rather than conceiving deployment in a ‘view from afar’, such as in terms of strategy or logistics, this paper probes the tour of duty in a ‘view from within’, that is, in terms of soldiering explored at the eye level of the dispatched troops. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with Danish combat troops before, during and after deployment to southern Afghanistan’s Helmand province, I examine the tour of duty as an adventurous form of military mobility. Empirically, I describe the home-away-home structure of the deployment cycle for some of the very last Danish ISAF forces: their preparing for war, their being at war and their returning from war. Analytically, I conceive their tour of duty as a search for adventure and thereby as a quest for personal transformation – a struggle for self-becoming in existential, moral and social terms. I argue that the Danish soldiers, I have followed as an embedded anthropologist, were broadly speaking seeking out the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan as an opportunity, however temporarily, for pursuing a life in movement, a life in transition, a life oscillating between the ‘home’ and the ‘front’, the familiar and the unknown, the ‘civilisation’ and the ‘wilderness’. I show that the tour of duty potentially entails a ‘happy ending’ adventure insofar that the deployment offers the troops in question a chance of trying their strength on the world. By the same token, I demonstrate that the tour might easily turn into an unsuccessful adventure if the soldiers fail or miss out on the deployment cycle’s tests and trials. In conclusion, the paper indicates that the tour of duty as an adventurous form of military mobility is fundamental to the motivation to serve within the ranks of Danish expeditionary forces. Furthermore, as far as the Danish case is concerned, the tour of duty is, I contend, a form of mobility that was not merely renewed but literally revitalised in deadly seriousness with the Danish Helmand campaign that saw the Danish army engaged in regular combat on a regular basis without precedence since the Second Schleswig War of 1864. By extension, I suggest that the tour of duty, experienced as an adventure, is most likely to be increasingly displaced into the background of those kinds of international operations in which the regular Danish forces are currently engaged, namely capacity-building and trip-wire presence. Could this development become a problem on the longer term, perhaps even a security

challenge from within? What are the implications going to be for recruiting and retaining volunteers if the tour of duty's new spirit of adventure is overtaken by what are perhaps more noble but perhaps also more dull spirits of 'mentorship' and 'solidarity'? Are the tour of duty then still going to attract young men and women who, with Hans Christian Andersen in mind, wants to live, and as I will add, feel alive on the edge?