In this chapter we discuss the relationship between the Royal Marines (hereafter RM) and the landscape. Recent discussions of the armed forces have considered their overall relationships to social and political structures, covering such issues as whether new soldiering skills are required in a ‘post-modern’ and globalized society in which their role has altered substantially; in a world wherein their primary objective may not simply be to defend the borders of the nation state. There has been a systematic movement towards decentralization of command, flexibility and a defence model emphasizing adaptation to a myriad of new circumstances where they must combat diffuse and unconventional forces such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Quality rather than quantity of forces and increasing specialization and professionalization have been key changes (e.g. Moskos et al. 2000; Sookermany 2011). Other studies have focused on ethical and moral issues, such as how states convince young people to go to war (Sasson-Levy 2007), issues of gender and sexuality and the construction of masculinities and their consequences: how values and norms of masculinity are structured by military training in models of military socialization, and how they in turn play their part in shaping discourses of masculinity in society as a whole (Barrett 1996; Morgan 1994; Newsinger 1997; Woodward 1998). Other studies have considered the social and psychological effects of particular military training programmes (Lande 2007; Cohen 2011; Samimian-Darash 2012) involving rites of passage and group bonding (Winslow 1999).

One of the key considerations in the anthropological literature has been the nature of the soldier’s body and its social and emotional production and management. Long ago Mauss argued that bodily
deportment – sitting, walking and sleeping – are all socially acquired. There is no ‘natural’ way in which these actions are performed (Mauss 1979 [1935]). He points out forcefully that British and French troops during the First World War were unable to use each other’s spades, because these were effectively extensions of their bodies and the two groups of soldiers had acquired different skills and motor abilities.

Foucault analyses the manner in which the body is produced by the discourses and social institutions that govern it (Foucault 1977; 1978; 1980). The soldier’s body becomes a surface in which power and the state become objectified, involving institutions, discourses and corporeality. Military socialization results in the internalization of norms and values that shape a new form of identity out of a civilian body, creating a different cognitive frame for engaging with and acting in the world (Frank 1991: 48–9). Frank (1991: 54–61; 69–79) links two types of bodies of the combat soldier: the disciplined body and the dominating body. The disciplined body, made predictable through training, pain and self-control, disciplines other bodies and thus becomes a dominating body. For Foucault discipline involves four main techniques: the division and arrangement and distribution of bodies, a detailed prescription of activities to be followed, a division of time into manageable segments and a network of links between bodies and their actions (Foucault 1977: 141ff.).

This is of general relevance to the discussion below although it needs to be emphasized that such a perspective is highly abstract and based on ‘classical’ eighteenth-century French military training. It is too easily assumed that military socialization strips away individuality, producing bodies (rather than persons) all of the same sort and in the same kind of way within the contexts of different nation states. There has been virtually no study, to our knowledge, of the relationship between military training and the embodied effects of landscape in group bonding and the construction of particularized and local military identities. This is our main concern here, together with their relationship to other user groups of the heathland and environmental issues.

The RM, part of the British Royal Navy, is an elite division of the British armed services forming the marine corps and amphibious infantry of the United Kingdom. They currently have a total manpower of 7,240 personnel and a volunteer reserve force of 970. This is the largest fighting force of its type in the European Union, and the second largest in NATO. Since their creation in 1942 the Royal Marines Commandos have been active across the globe; they undertake dedicated training in the Arctic for cold-weather warfare and also elsewhere for jungle warfare. They are a highly specialized light force capable of
being deployed at rapid notice. Since the Second World War all basic commando training has taken place at the Commando Training Centre (CTCRM, hereafter CTC) at Lympstone in East Devon. CTC provides training for new recruits, further specialist training in particular areas and, for officers, command training. The RM recruit training is the longest basic infantry training programme for any NATO force combat troops, taking thirty-two weeks. The East Devon Pebblebed heathlands are their principal training area in the United Kingdom. All recruits begin their training in this landscape. Throughout the training routine in the field classroom-type instruction takes place where the recruits sit on the ground in front of a trainer, followed by practical exercises in the landscape.

**Recruits and the training programme**

Entry to the recruit training programme follows a Potential Royal Marines Course at Lympstone lasting three days and designed to assess candidates’ physical fitness and intellectual capacity for recruit training. If successful the candidate then enters the thirty-two-week training cycle. A new course of training, each time for a troop of between fifty-five and sixty recruits, starts at Lympstone about every two weeks throughout the year. Allowing for holiday periods etc. this means that the CTC trains about twenty to twenty-four troops of recruits a year, or about 1,200 to 1,400 men (there are no women). Recruits are between sixteen and thirty years old. The training involves various components, some (such as classroom training, physical fitness and weapon training) taking place primarily at the Lympstone Base and the Straight Point firing range on the coast to the west of Budleigh Salterton, others on the Pebblebed heathlands, with some more advanced training also taking place on Dartmoor, in South Wales and elsewhere.

Such is the arduousness and rigour of the training programme that there is a high attrition rate for recruits: between fifty and fifty-five per cent drop out during the thirty-two week training cycle. So less than half of those who begin their training at Lympstone will actually pass out as a RM; about 600–700 men per annum. In addition very few recruits go through the entire training regime and pass out after a continuous thirty-two-week period of training. The average time taken is about thirty-eight weeks. For some recruits it may be longer. Many have to go through part of the training cycle again, joining upcoming troops of recruits who started later in the training cycle than they did.
Each new troop of recruits is guided through the entire training period by the same group of officers, usually six in number, made up of a Captain, a Sergeant and four Corporals. They are responsible for organizing, monitoring and assessing all aspects of training. They develop an acute personal understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the recruits in their charge. For individual practical field training exercises every recruit troop is generally divided into four sections, each with between eight and fifteen recruits, instructed by an officer.

The Woodbury Common Training Area

The RM train in all areas of the Pebblebed heathlands. Although these comprise a number of different Commons (Woodbury, Bicton, East Budleigh, etc.) the RM refer to the entire area, as do many members of the general public, as Woodbury Common. The RM training area is divided on the 1:2,500 topographic map into zones designated by capital letters (C-Z), with fire or rendezvous points (RV3, RV10, RV19, etc.) marking specific locations within the training area and the zones. These form the principal reference points for planning and organizing the training programme across the Commons by CTC. These RV locations are not known or used by the general public (except by ex-members of the RM) and represent a distinct element in a RM cartographic grid devised for their own purposes.

The RM have indelibly marked the landscape of Woodbury Common in a way that has no equivalent among any other user group. They have created their own network of tiny ‘sheep tracks’ across areas of the heathland where there are no other tracks.

Permanent white flag poles mark the perimeter of the grenade range danger area, with red flags raised during firing practice when access is forbidden to the general public in the vicinity. It is regularly in use on a Thursday once every two weeks. The grenade range where live firing takes place is located at the approximate centre of the main training area.

Its surrounding chain-link fence was the only area of the heathland that was permanently fenced until the recent addition of cattle fencing on Bicton Common. It also contains the only buildings on Woodbury Common apart from some upstanding remnants of the old Second World War RM Dalditch camp in the southern part of Woodbury Common. This once housed 5,000 troops before the D-Day landings in France. The booming noise made as the recruits throw the grenades at targets on the impact area can be heard right across the heathlands and beyond.
Figure 3.1  A Royal Marine sheeptrack leading up to a Bronze Age cairn used as an orientation point

Figure 3.2  The grenade range
Parts of the heathland in its vicinity, and elsewhere, are scarred with the remains of pits and trenches that have significantly altered the character of the vegetation. The endurance course, incorporating a variety of structures and natural obstacles in the south of the area, is in regular use throughout the year (see below) and forms another significant structural element of the contemporary landscape.

Except on the grenade range no live firing takes place and the RM effectively share the whole of Woodbury Common with members of the general public throughout the year. This is a very different situation from many other military training areas in the UK such as East Lulworth in Dorset, Dartmoor in Devon and Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, from which the general public is excluded for much of the time or where the public is allowed to use designated areas or tracks only when warning flags are taken down at weekends or during holiday periods. Thus the RM, unlike many of the other UK armed services, have to undertake their training in the public spotlight.

In total the RM use Woodbury Common for 350,000 man-hours of training annually. Exercises take place during the day and at night and include map reading and orientation, signalling, camouflage and concealment, stalking, rifle training using blanks, bush survival techniques including camping and cooking, physical fitness training, ambush and combat tactics.

The RM have privileged access to the area insofar as they are the only user group who are allowed to camp out overnight (apart from fishermen around the Squabmoor reservoir) and drive lorries and other vehicles along access tracks on a regular basis. The only area that is out of bounds for military training is the Iron Age hill fort, Woodbury Castle, although even here troops may be observed passing through and picnicking on the ramparts. Today they also make very limited use of the Aylesbeare and Harpford RSPB nature reserve, in the north of the area, using it only for occasional map-reading exercises. The rest of the Commons are used intensively. Considerable planning is required in order to keep the Commons ‘decongested’ or to stop different troops at different stages in their training, or other groups of RM engaged in more advanced specialist training exercises, getting in each other’s way.

The RM have the strong ideological support of the landowners, CDE. CDE also benefits financially from the arrangement, receiving about £15,000/annum for the lease of the land for the grenade range and another £62,000/annum for a training licence to use the rest of the area.

The RM use Woodbury Common more frequently and for far longer continuous periods than any other user group, having a twenty-four-hour
presence during weekdays for much of the year. There is rarely a night when members of the RM are not using some area. Officers and recruit trainers have an intimate knowledge and familiarity with the area unrivalled by all but a few members of the general public. They regard it as ‘their’ landscape in both a utilitarian and emotional way. It is their taskscape, where they live and work. The heathland landscape becomes embodied in significant respects in their personal biographies and identities.

Place names and reference points

There are relatively few named places on the standard Ordnance Survey topographic maps. Some woodland areas, copses and streams lack names as do large areas of the undulating heathland topography. As a consequence the RM have their own reference points, principally the twenty rendezvous points with reference to which training is organized. For example, RV9 marks the beginning and end of the endurance course. RV14 is a Bronze Age barrow, a distinctive landmark on a high point on which a clump of pine trees grow. Other RVs mark different high points without standard map names, or car parks, junctions of tracks and roads. Gradually a recruit learns to navigate through the Commons and find out where he is in relation to these reference points. When we mentioned areas of the heathlands using names found on the ordinary topographic map, such as ‘the eastern side of Colaton Raleigh Common’ or ‘the summit area of Aylesbeare Common’, neither recruits nor trainers knew precisely which area we were referring to. Reference to an RV number elicited a very knowledgeable response by comparison.

The RM also have other kinds of names for distinctive elements of the landscape not found on standard topographic maps, e.g. Strip Wood, a long linear plantation; Split Wood, a pine plantation dissected by a road and firebreaks; Diamond Wood, a copse in the shape of a diamond. Lookout Copse is a regularly used observation post for camouflage and concealment stalking exercises. This is a square embanked tree-ring enclosure of pine trees overlooking a valley up which recruits will move. Sniper’s Wood is one place where sniper training takes place and recruits camp out and so on. These place names are largely descriptive and prosaic. The Iron Age enclosure of Woodbury Castle, situated on the highest point of the Commons with its distinctive beech trees, is another major reference point regularly used in night orientation exercises. In the absence of any castle in the usual sense of this term, it is referred to as ‘Castle Feature’. Through mastering these names and reference points
and using them, a growing familiarity with Woodbury Common builds up, through time, on the part of the recruit, and by the end of their training none would get lost.

Bodily experience in the landscape

Apart from vehicular access and occasional helicopter drops on one specially designated zone on Woodbury Common all RM training takes place on foot. The recruit becomes familiar with the Common through sleeping out on it and developing bush survival skills and through moving across it from one place to another. The trainers and officers sleep in tents on cot beds and cook their own food. Tents are pitched adjacent to woods and copses; the recruits sleep out during the night in their sleeping bags under ponchos supported by short stakes or suspended by ropes between trees in order to keep the rain off. They cook their rations (boil-in-the-bag food) on small hexamine stoves amongst the trees. Well concealed, these are known as ‘harbour’ areas, from which they emerge to undertake various exercises in the training programme. Some recruits have never camped out before. Few have ever experienced wild camping. None have experienced walking in the darkness across rough terrain. Many have had little or no experience of map reading or orientation in a landscape. The initial weeks of training involve a fast learning curve relating map to terrain to body.

A crucial part of the basic training programme is to teach stealth and concealment. This involves making the body in the landscape as invisible as possible and learning techniques by which one can move from one place to another without being sensed by others. This involves not only being concealed but also not being heard by others. Controlling the body crucially means being made aware of touch and its effects. Movement is not just about controlling the body. It also involves weapons, principally the rifle. This effectively becomes an extension of the body of the recruit. The rifle needs to be kept clean and dry, ready for use at all times.

Camouflaging the body effectively means trying to make it as amorphous as possible using vegetation. Ideally it should dissolve into the landscape, become part of it. The uniform is already camouflaged in khaki, brown and green. Bracken, grass and whatever other materials are ready to hand are stuffed into the webbing covering the helmet and over the shoulders, so that they become rounded in profile, as well as into more webbing around the belt. The face is blackened with wax. In this manner the recruit will merge into the landscape and its vegetation rather than standing out and contrasting with it, figure against ground.
Recruits are taught about why things are seen in a landscape. This essentially means being aware of the significance of movement, shape, shadow and silhouette, the need to conceal light and to minimize sound. For example, recruits are trained to be aware that even such small things as the sound of a zip might be heard 200 m or more away on a still night.

Ways of moving

The ‘kitten crawl’ is a technique of moving when one is in close encounter with the enemy. The hands are stretched out in front of the body making sure there are no foliage or twigs that will break and make a sound. If these are present they must be cleared away. The recruit feels in front of him and sweeps away anything that is going to crack or make a noise. He then places his weight on both his elbows and raises his belly slightly above the ground so it does not drag or create friction. Using his toes he rocks forward and places his belly down again. This is an extremely slow and laborious way of moving. But done properly it is almost silent and an excellent way of moving very close to an enemy position.

The ‘leopard crawl’ is a standard front crawl and potentially makes a lot more noise. The weapon is cupped or cradled so as to protect it on the arms of the recruit, who moves on his elbows and knees, dragging himself forward. This is likely to make more of an audible signature but is faster. The aim is to stay low and, using cover, protect the body from being seen.

The ‘baby crawl’ involves moving forward using the fists and knees and keeping the weapon pointing forwards so that the enemy can be engaged at all times. Putting the fists on the ground protects the softer palms of the hands, crucial for using the rifle, from being scraped or cut. The ‘monkey run’ is another, quicker technique employed when there is more and higher vegetation cover; a semi-vertical form of body posture, that is rather awkward to learn. It involves standing on the back legs but moving forward in a stooped position supported by the fist of one hand, the other being used to keep the rifle pointing forwards.

The ‘ghost walk’ is a method of moving appropriate to jungle warfare, primarily used at night when it is difficult to see anything. The hands are used to sweep in front of the eyes to stop anything scraping the face. The foot is simultaneously used to sweep the ground and clear away anything that might break or make a sound. The recruit moves forward by placing the toes down first and then the rest of the foot. The weapon is held up ready to shoot but you look over the top of the sight in order to
maintain peripheral vision. This method of holding the rifle is a lot more stressful on the body and is only possible for short periods of time. Such a walk is extremely slow and deliberate, but done properly enables silent upright movement that should not be detected. It was only when the author attempted to perform these same movements with the recruits, causing some considerable amusement and distraction for them, that their true difficulty became readily apparent. The rules of movement underlying each could only be learnt after many repeated attempts over a considerable period of time. They needed to become part of a bodily flow of movement and absorbed through the body in this manner. Thinking about what one was supposed to do and trying to move in the manner required only resulted in something clumsy and ineffectual.

Such modes of bodily movement perfectly fit Foucault’s perspective in which he argues that precision and application, together with regularity, are the fundamental virtues of disciplinary time (Foucault 1977: 151): ‘a sort of anatomo-chronological schema of behaviour is defined. The act is broken down into its elements; the position of the body, limbs, articulations is defined; to each movement are assigned a direction and aptitude, a duration; their order of succession is prescribed’ (Foucault 1977: 152). He argues that there is a correlation between the body and the gesture. Discipline imposes the best possible relation between a gesture and the overall position of the body. The outcome of successful military training is that this becomes embodied, part of a pre-objective knowledge of the body in space-time.

The most visible form of moving across the landscape involves standing and walking forward with head held upright. The rifle is held forward with the butt in the shoulder but lowered, a position termed ‘ready alert’. This is not a normal form of walking but involves moving forward while constantly swaying the body from right to left all the time. The rifle moves in tandem with the movements of the body of the recruit. This allows the recruit to constantly scan and search the terrain across which they are moving and observe any signs of the enemy either in front or to either side of him. It allows one to be observant while making a good pace. Such a mode of patrolling should be undertaken confidently. The soldier should be able to observe and to be seen by others to be observing, thus instilling confidence rather than seeming to be timid or afraid. Such ‘mind games’ may be of the utmost importance for success and in relation to a civilian population. Troops always move forward with one man behind the other with a distance of about twenty or thirty metres between them, never side by side. They thus significantly reduce the risk of being ambushed or decimated all at once. In these ways of moving, as
the potential visibility of the recruit increases the importance of reducing sound and the significance of touch decreases.

Recruit training thus requires the development of skilled ways of moving through the landscape. It also involves learning techniques for how to cope with obstacles, whether natural such as crossing a bog or human-constructed such as ditches, barbed wire fences or walls. Battle training involves other forms of coordinated movement, such as running some distance apart down and up slopes in a zig-zag fashion so as to avoid enemy fire, with one recruit providing cover from behind for another running forward. The kind of movement that is most appropriate depends on the terrain, the vegetation cover and the objective in hand in relation to an enemy. Thus open ground can in some circumstances facilitate movement. In other situations it can be regarded as being as much an obstacle as a barbed wire fence.

Looking and seeing

The recruit thus learns to move through the landscape in a variety of different ways in relation to the perceived threat or proximity to an enemy. Whether visible on patrol or stationary, recruits are also taught to look at the landscape in a different kind of way. This might be termed a technical or functional way of looking and is about as far removed as one can get from an aesthetic, romantic gaze. Recruits learn both how to observe and how to sketch the landscape, a technique known as ‘panoramic sketching’ from a given point. The landscape is visually scanned and searched. This entails systematic observation from the near to the middle to the distant ground. The recruit observes that which is closest to him to the left, centre and then the right moving the head from left to right and then right to left, then left to right again and so on until he reaches the limits of his visual field on the horizon. He will try and spot anything that seems unusual or out of place, in particular the presence or potential presence of the enemy and where they might be hiding. While patrolling and moving through the landscape a similar technique will be used.

A panoramic sketch is an attempt to reproduce such a visually searched and scanned landscape from a fixed lookout point that is easily accessible to others, for example to pass from one sentry to another so that the guardsman knows where and how to look in a simple and easily portable manner that requires no specialist equipment. The recruit learns to make such a sketch by superimposing a grid over the sketch of the visual field and by using standard rules of perspective to convey the distance of an object. Features represented on the sketches include outstanding
points, rivers, woods, particular trees or bushes, roads, tracks and buildings, etc. Height is represented by standard techniques of shading, and by using contour and vertical lines.

The recruit needs to be able to cope with the landscape and move through it with speed and efficiency, either by day or night. Part of this involves learning how to read and use maps, take and follow bearings. On more advanced exercises recruits will receive instructions on detailed route cards showing them where to go, from one checkpoint where trainers will be waiting for them to arrive to another. A typical route card gives the map grid reference from a starting point to a checkpoint, the magnetic bearing to be followed between the two, the distance between the two, the height as measured by contours that will be gained or lost (e.g. six contours = 60 m uphill), the number of paces that will be required to cover the distance and the expected time that it will take. A standard calculation is 4 km/hour on flat terrain. Extra minutes are added on for uphill or downhill movement. So for example moving uphill for six contours or 60 m requiring 877 paces on a bearing will mean that a recruit will be allowed an additional six minutes to move between two checkpoints 1.35 km apart. Thus bodily movement across the landscape is regulated and assessed according to a strict mathematical formula. In order to help the recruit achieve these goals a brief description of the ground will be given: ‘You will set off walking up hill. You will be covering open ground. After 400 m you will see a large wood block to your right. It will remain 200 m away from you’, or ‘You will set off downhill. You will cross a river after 450 m, 400 m from that river you will cross a path. You will see a lone building to your front’. The production and use of these route cards show a meticulous attention to detail in the landscape on the part of the troop training team and a rationalized system of calculation with regard to the manner in which the body of the recruit should move across it from point to point. Recruits learn to count paces by using a string with small beads on it, which they can move up or down with every pace taken like a little abacus.

To a new recruit unfamiliar with the landscape, Woodbury Common appears vast and forbidding. To the officers, who know it much better, it appears small: ‘When you come back on a training team you actually start to move around and think, good god, how do they shoehorn all these people into this small area’ (RM Major).

The cognitive maps drawn for us by recruits and trainers were, as we expected, very different. Those drawn by recruits show only the small part of the heathland with which they were familiar during their initial training. They show part of the endurance course (see discussion below),
the Woodbury to Yettington road and the model aircraft car park, as well as a network of tracks to the north and ‘Castle Feature’ (Woodbury Castle). They record wooded areas significant to the recruits because they are ‘harbour’ areas in which they camp out overnight.

The map drawn by the official responsible for the land management of RM training activities was very detailed indeed.

It depicts the full extent of the heathlands from Aylesbeare Common in the north to East Budleigh Common in the south. Ten RV points are shown, as are the grenade range and endurance course, with various features marked on the latter. Beyond that plantation areas are shown, the B3180 road to the west of the heathlands, the quarry, Woodbury Castle

Figure 3.3 Recruit’s map 1
and Four Firs, with RM names for various features given. Other maps produced by trainers emphasized features of the endurance course to the exclusion of much else (Figure 3.6), or marked it along with key features in the training routine: plantations, RV points, the grenade range, quarry and Woodbury Castle.

The knowledge of the recruit is necessarily fragmented. He is taken up to the Common for training, accessing different places for different
exercises, for example to RV19 in the fourteenth week of training for a three-day exercise in which recruits are taught how to integrate a variety of skills acquired in previous field exercises. The trainers know how the different training areas fit together, the same places generally being used for the same exercises in different weeks of the training cycle over and
over again, so for them the landscape is small. Recruits are being tested all the time and many fear the risk of failure. Heads down, performing the task at hand, they hardly have time to look or think about the landscape they are training in. They just have to move through it and endure. Trainers on the other hand can get out of their tent in the morning, have a mug of tea, and enjoy the view while the recruits are busy laying out their kit for inspection. It was the trainers rather than the recruits who thought this was sometimes a beautiful landscape to work in. For others, however, it remained simply a place of work, not somewhere where they would want to spend any of their free time.

The weapon, kit and the body

The weapon, as mentioned above, is very much an extension of the body of the recruit and an essential part of training is not only to learn how to shoot accurately at a target but to learn how to hold it, whether on patrol crossing open ground or in jungle conditions, when walking or crawling or crossing dry ground, marsh or water. It must be possible
to use it at all times through being held and supported in the right way and by keeping it clean and dry. The rifle is in a sense cradled and protected from harm like a baby. An essential part of training routines involves being able to assemble and load the rifle quickly and efficiently, keep supplies of ammunition in the correct place and ready to hand and clean the rifle meticulously. The rifle has to move in a systematic way in relation to the body of the recruit, in relation to the hands that hold it, the fingers, the shoulder, the eyes and the overall posture of the body: motionless or moving, standing up or lying down, crossing water and boggy terrain or crawling through water-filled tunnels where it will be held above the head. This body–weapon relation involves a complex and ever changing articulation between the two. Movement of the body must flow into the movement of the weapon and vice versa, thus becoming one and the same. Training involves making the rifle a natural and organic part of the body that holds it. Fighting thus involves learning the motions and emotions accompanying the use of weapons. These sensorimotor practices (Warnier 2001) thus produce particular types of subjectivities and aptitudes among the recruits, allowing them to eventually pass out as a Royal Marine at the end of the training programme.

Morning kit inspection involves the recruit laying out all items in neat rows on his poncho, used as a bivouac cover at night, for inspection by the training team. This inspection covers the weapon, standard kit provided and the body of the recruit. Kit inspection covers items such as bivouac poles, flannels used for cleaning the body, water bottles, food rations and ‘gash’ (a RM term for rubbish) such as food wrappings from the daily ration pack. Standards of bodily hygiene are considered paramount. For example flannels used for cleaning the face or upper part of the body must be kept separated from those used for lower parts of the body. The face should be clean, without dirt or remains of camouflage materials. Visual inspection thus allows trainers to monitor the skin, the physical external state of the recruit, while examination of the gash effectively enables the trainers to assess what the recruit has drunk or eaten, to monitor what is inside his body as well. If the kit or the recruit’s body is dirty or untidy, or if the manner in which they are dressed is slovenly, this may reveal much of value about their state of mind and state of preparedness for action.

The daily ration pack contains 5,000 calories, far more than the normal daily requirements for an adult male, and provides up to four meals per day. Food is considered essentially as providing fuel for the body of the recruit to be able to carry on despite the vigorous and arduous nature
of much of the training. Other considerations such as taste and variety
are secondary, although trainers say that taste and quality have improved
over the years.

Being able to pack away all the equipment speedily and carry it in
the right place, whether suspended from the belt or placed in a particular
order from bottom to top in the rucksack, is another essential element in
the training routine. It might take a recruit anything up to two hours to
do this in initial training, a mere fifteen minutes towards the end.

Mind and body

The atmosphere in a wooded harbour area where the recruits sleep is
hushed. Voices are always low; there are no lights except occasional glow
lights. Use of red torches only is permitted, and no fires.

Recruits are usually so exhausted after a day of training that they
go to sleep almost instantly. One of the most frequent complaints made
was a lack of sleep, given that they may be woken up for night exercises
or for other reasons such as sentry duty. A term used by the recruits for
themselves is a ‘nod’. A nod is someone liable to nod off, go to sleep, as a
result of sheer physical exhaustion.

In their advertising material the slogan used for the RM is ‘It’s a state
of mind.’ This involves ‘confidence, strength, independence and ability’
Training transforms a civilian body into a soldier’s body, and the essence of this is that it contrasts with the wrong sort of body, the kind of body that will be eliminated by the training process (Weiss 2002). All this involves a classic assertion of a mind/body dualism in which the mind is considered to be primary and separate from a machine-like body over which it will ideally exert its will. Body and mind are not considered to be necessarily in harmony or balance. Masculinity is determined primarily by a healthy body, not a healthy mind (Arkin and Dobrofsky 1978: 156). The body will inevitably give up if left to its own devices. The mind must be trained to muster up sufficient willpower to keep that body going, to counter its inevitable weakness and fallibility. Training to be a Royal Marine is thus understood by the Marines themselves not as a form of equilibrium between mind and body, but more of a battle in which the recruit is trained to counteract the ‘natural weakness’ of his body through mental resilience, making the body endure the rigours of training.

RM training, if successful, is thus conceived as resulting in a victory of mind over body, a classic Cartesian split. But on the other hand this may result in physical collapse or injury and the recruit dropping out:

I know guys who have been doing speed marches who have kept on going until they have collapsed and that is the body obviously saying I haven’t got any more, the mind has told me to keep going whereas if you haven’t done that training your body will just step to the side and say well, no I can’t do any more. It’s your mind giving up before your body has given up and that’s the point to push yourself a little bit more … and it’s the mind that enables you to do that not your body.

(Captain and RM trainer)

A trainer is incapable of enforcing discipline from the outside, as it were. What he must try and do is to instil a regime in which the recruit learns the self-discipline necessary for survival together with differing forms of bodily deportment and movement appropriate to different situations. Above all the RM body must be capable of flexibility. Some forms of bodily movement, such as parade-ground training exercises, are mainly for the purposes of publicly visible display, moving in step, etc. Those learnt training in the landscape are of a very different character.

Being prepared for action and putting up with a lack of sleep is one element in all this. Others involve surviving physically demanding fitness regimes and induced bodily discomfort. One of the early elements
introduced into the training programme is the ‘wet and dry routine’. This involves wading through a bog up to the neck in water in full uniform. The recruit must then remove these clothes before going to sleep and then put them back on the following morning. All recruits regard this as trying, especially during the winter months when air and water temperatures may be below freezing. The wetness and weight of the uniform quite literally weigh down on the body of the recruit in a manner that is dispiriting. Having escaped it in order to sleep there is little that is worse than having to put it back on again in the chill light of dawn. This leads us on to consider the relationship between training, landscape and endurance.

Training, landscape and endurance

The recruits hate this place because they’ve suffered up here. Give them a couple of years and they may well look back and think, well actually, compared to Afghanistan, the Commons are a lovely place. Perceptions change, don’t they?

(RM Lt Col)

All the RM officers interviewed considered Woodbury Common an ideal landscape for training at a basic level. Firstly the topography is varied, consisting of high points where one can look out across the landscape, ideal for developing map-reading skills. The bogs and valleys provide ideal places for concealment and stalking and add to the difficulty of negotiating one’s way through the landscape and learning orientation techniques. There is a mix of vegetation from pine plantations and copses to open gorse and heather heathland. The former provide ideal harbour areas, the latter undulating rough terrain to move across by day and by night. The undulating terrain and the mosaic of different vegetation types are ideal for developing tactical skills, providing ambush and lookout points. They facilitate learning how to cross the landscape without being observed. In some areas there are useful natural orientation points such as distinctive wood blocks, prehistoric barrows capped by clumps of trees and reticulated valley systems. The landscape is criss-crossed with tracks and streams that can be integrated. In short a varied topography and vegetation is ideally suited to the basic training programme.

The nature of the bedrock – pebbles – is also beneficial insofar as it makes it exceptionally difficult to dig bunkers or hiding places, and its unstable nature adds to the difficulty of moving quietly and quickly. In
the words of one recruit: ‘A lot of stones on the ground. It makes you crazy running up the hills and stuff. You have to be careful not to get a broken ankle’ (Recruit Jon). Recruits are taught to be careful about their foot placement, controlling the distribution of their body weights as they are going up and down hills and through the gullies on the endurance course.

In the recent past trench-digging in the pebble bedrock formed an essential element in the RM training regime. This practice was discontinued in 2002 because of objections by Natural England with regard to vegetation disturbance (see Figure 2.9). Large areas of the heathland, mainly to the south and west of the grenade range, are riddled with trenches and pits. Digging out such positions was described to us by one trainer who had himself done this as a recruit in the following way:

I thought it was good value for recruits, good team building for four guys to dig a 4 m trench over two days. A real team builder. It means that you have to work hard. It’s one of the things that toughens you up I think. It’s horrendous. You can literally wear out a pick on just one trench. You had to de-turf such a large area and it is not easy stuff to de-turf and then lay your trench out and start hacking away and it would be heart-breaking to start early evening, work through the night and first thing in the morning you see what you have done, and you have only gone down a foot or two.

(Sergeant, 122 Troop)

Crossing the numerous bog systems was also a nightmare for the recruits. High clumps of grass known to the RM as ‘babies’ heads’ are interspersed across wet, boggy areas where you can sink down to your knees, making crossing them very difficult, especially at night, not only because of the wetness but also the unevenness of the terrain: ‘You’ll be walking and you’ll stand on the side of it [a tuft of bog grass] and go over on your ankle. You know what I mean in the dark a lot of lads get broken ankles, sprained ankles’ (Recruit Paul).

Large parts of Woodbury Common are covered with dense gorse that may grow up to 2 m or more in height. Gorse is an exceptionally spiky and vicious plant (see Figure 2.17). The thorns penetrate the clothing, however tough, and considerably add to the difficulties and rigours of training. All the six recruits interviewed complained bitterly about it being quite horrendous on their training exercises. The training officers,
who no longer had to wade or fight their way through it, commented on its more beneficial effects in relation to toughening the body:

I don’t think I’d actually encountered gorse until I came here and obviously it’s a rude awakening when you face it for the first time and you are fighting your way through it, so it is an absolutely fabulous place to conduct training because it does sort of toughen you up because it’s like a constant battle moving from A to B … When you are young and naïve you just follow the bearing so if it’s down deep dale and up and through thickets you just plough straight through it, so it provides a very challenging environment to conduct training and helps to bring a little bit of bite and reality into the robustness that we are trying to instil in our men.

(RM Major)

‘Woodbury rash’ was mentioned frequently by recruits, a sometimes-chronic inflammation of the skin that might last for two weeks or more and that is caused by gorse spikes penetrating the body and causing infection. Getting rid of it might require one to lie in a bath with disinfectant. Toxins arising from infection that destroy white blood cells have been fatal in a tiny number of cases. The latest RM recruit reported to have died from this in the recent past was in 2005. Some recruits writing blogs on the RM website have been seriously worried about their health, having been infected.

Woodbury Common is thus a tough and unforgiving landscape in which to train, providing a unique combination of topographical obstacles and vegetational characteristics that make the going arduous, as does its geology. It is understandable that most recruits during training had little affection for this landscape. Sometimes it might seem like a kind of hell on earth from which one longed to escape to the comforts of the CTC Lympstone base. The officers and trainers had a rather different and broader perspective. Woodbury Common actually contributed in a beneficial sense to what the RM are supposed to be all about, a tough and resilient fighting force ready and able to cope with any landscape or conditions in which they find themselves. Other landscapes used for military training, such as Dartmoor, Sennybridge in south Wales, or Salisbury Plain were relatively easy training grounds in comparison, lacking the gorse. They were described to me as being mainly grassland areas and far less topographically varied. Their only real advantage from a military point of view was scale. They covered a far greater area, allowing
manoeuvres over much greater distances than was possible on Woodbury Common.

The RM were described to us by a recruit trainer as being ‘sub-standard athletes’. They might not be able to win the marathon or excel at the high jump in the Olympics, but on passing out the level of physical fitness of a recruit would be very high indeed. To produce such bodies from what was described to me as the ‘Playstation generation’, not used to the outdoor life, is no mean achievement. Teaching the recruit creates superior bodily deportment. Recruits said they no longer went ‘slouching around’. They felt their body was more disciplined, with a superior posture, and reckoned that you could almost certainly tell the difference between a RM in ordinary clothes and a civilian walking down the street.
The endurance course

At the end of their thirty-two-week training programme the RM recruits undergo their final tests over a continuous seven-day ritualized initiation period. These tests are the endurance course, a nine-mile speed march carrying full fighting kit; the Tarzan assault course, starting with a ‘death slide’ and ending with a rope climb up a 30 ft (10 m)-high vertical wall; and a thirty-mile ‘yomp’ across Dartmoor carrying all their own equipment. Any element that is failed must be taken again during the same week before the recruit can pass out as a Royal Marine, a fully-formed soldier.

The endurance course, the first element in this punishing schedule, is a 3.2 km obstacle course on Woodbury Common ending with a 7.2 km track and road run back to CTC at Lympstone, where the recruit must hit six out of ten shots at a 25 m target. This has to be completed in 73 minutes (71 minutes for officers). The recruits have to undertake this in full fighting kit carrying 14.5 kg of equipment, including their rifle, which has to be kept clean and dry so that they can hit the target at the end. This course was first set up in the late 1940s and the route and the types of obstacles encountered have changed relatively little since, apart from erosion creating deepening gullies and pebble exposures across bog surfaces. As a result some sections are easier now than in the past, others more difficult.

In the following section we undertake a phenomenological exploration of the course route in the landscape and its experiential bodily effects.

It is all about that mental strength and physical robustness and that ability to endure … week 31 is when you do them. They come at the end of a 32-week training pipeline so your body has gone through that 30 weeks of debilitation, tiredness, soul-sapping way of life.

(RM Major)

The endurance course starts at RV9 (see Figure 3.8). This is a local high point beside a minor road crossing the Common at Tuckers Plants. From here the route drops down into a wide wooded valley before leaving it, gradually ascending on a narrow pebbly track through dense gorse bushes along the flank of a spur. At the top of this path the first ‘dry’ tunnel, is encountered, 24 m long. This requires the recruit to bend low before entering it. The tunnel lined by corrugated iron sheeting with wooden supports reduces significantly in height, bends to the left, requiring crawling through on the knees in the darkness over the pebbles. It then curves to the left again at the far exit. The bends not only have the effect of making it dark but also of giving a distorted sense of its length.
Figure 3.9A  Exit of dry tunnel

Figure 3.9B  Gully
On emerging the recruit runs up a gentle slope, now along a well-defined pathway which is distinctly less pebbly and more sandy and gritty, going through remains of part of the old Second World War Dalditch camp. The recruit now arrives at a broad open space and takes a sharp right turn, now running over a coarse path surfaced with bricks from the old camp that is relatively easy to run on for about 100 m. The path drops down into a shallow, broad valley, passing the eastern end of a Second World War rifle butt and then bending to the left before reaching a valley bottom. It then rises up a short, steep slope covered with pebbles. At the top the recruit turns sharp left and proceeds for 100 m before veering right to a double tunnel obstacle built above ground, with a wooden façade, corrugated iron sides and an earth and pebble covering. These tunnels, bending to the right, again through which one must crawl, are frequently wet inside during the winter months. They have a rough pebbly surface and are 20 m in length and 0.8 m high.

The exit is on a high point by Sniper’s Copse with a view down into a deep, broad valley. After 15 m the course drops very steeply down into this valley through a very deep and narrow kinked gully, effectively a roofless tunnel. This has jagged, crumbling, red pebbly sides and an unstable, rolling pebbly base. Trying to run down this is like running on ball bearings. The gully appears to be natural but in fact is the result

Figure 3.9C  Peter’s pool
An AnThropology of lAnDsCApe

of human erosion, marking the passage of so many generations of RM troops, deepening every year.

There is nothing like it anywhere else on Woodbury Common except along two further sections of the endurance course. There is a fan of loose pebbles at the bottom of the gully where one reaches the edge of a broad, flat and very boggy valley bottom through which the Budleigh Brook flows east.

There is a bog down there and Peter’s Pool. You’ll go up to your chest. In this weather [-2 degrees Celsius, with a strong wind blowing making it feel like –8 C] it’s not going to be very nice!

(Recruit Daniel)

I went through training ’79 … It was just, to me, it was just a horrible area to be dragged through, up to your neck in water, you know.

(Supervisor, Straight Point Firing Range)

The course crosses the valley through a deep pool, known to the RM as Peter’s Pool.

This is where the wet and dry routines take place early on in the training programme. Taller recruits are immersed up to their necks. Shorter recruits effectively have to bounce across the bottom to keep their heads above water. One arm and hand, holding the rifle, is held above the head in order to keep the rifle dry, the other is used to grasp a rope suspended across the pool to aid the recruits in pulling themselves through to the other end. The pool is almost 50 m in length, irregular in shape and up to 10 m wide, filled by rivulets of water that flow into it from the bog, predominantly from the west and north. The long axis of the pool is across the valley bottom from south to north with a straggling line of birch trees on the eastern side. This pool has been artificially modified and deepened over the years. In 2010 gorse bales were flown here and dumped by helicopter in an exercise by the RM to prevent massive erosion of the boggy ground on its eastern side, where it is possible to sink swiftly down to the knees and beyond. All RM know and remember this place and there are a number of different dits (stories) about how it acquired its name (e.g. after a frothy-mouthed ranting sergeant, or a dead recruit), but nobody knows for sure.

The course now winds and ascends through gorse. The path is only about 50 cm wide, worn down through peat sediments to a pebble base, along which a rivulet flows. After about 50 m the path emerges from the gorse onto a dry, broad shoulder of land forming the north side of the
Figure 3.9D  Pebble path

Figure 3.9E  The sheep dip
valley and passes between two small prehistoric barrows to the left and the right.

The recruit, now wearing completely sodden clothing that clings to, chills, and further weighs down his body, ascends a steep slope on a path now up to 2 m wide and covered with loose pebbles.

At the top of the slope the path bends to the right (east) and then descends steeply through another narrow gully that cuts through the steep edge of the valley and is up to 3 m deep. This has a loose, unstable pebble floor and crumbling, jagged pebble sides in a red sandy matrix that can easily rasp the hands should one slip. Again there is a large fan of eroded pebbles spilling out into the valley floor at the bottom. The path, eroded through the peat, then crosses a side valley to the left through boggy ground in which a steam flows. The recruit now confronts the next obstacle, the water tunnels, called by some recruits the ‘sheep dip’.

This consists of three irregular water tanks constructed from concrete blocks. The first chamber collects the water from the stream running through the side valley, and this then fills the second and third chambers. These are connected by two water-filled concrete pipes 70 cm wide and 2 m long, through which, fully submerged, the recruits have to pass. This requires the teamwork of three recruits. One jumps into the first water tank, placing his rifle on top of the water pipes. Another jumps in behind him and a third into the last tank. The first recruit takes a deep breath and enters the water pipe. He is pushed and pulled through by the two other recruits in front of and behind him, who then take their turns.

Emerging from the pipes the recruits retrieve their rifles and run up a loose, pebbly slope to the north-east, ascending over the face of an old brick-built Second World War rifle butt. The course then drops down into a shallow, dry valley before rising again up a very pebbly slope. The path then proceeds east along the top of a spur running parallel to the valley to the south for about 20 m to a pine clump. Here it bends sharply to the right down to the valley bottom. The course cuts through the slope, through an extremely constricted pebble-filled gully in places only 30 cm wide at the base, scarcely allowing one to put one foot in front of the other. It plunges down through thick, gorse-covered slopes, meandering through the pebble deposits on either side up to 3 m in height. The base of this gully is filled with large eroded pebbles, some the size of boulders. It has a spiky gorse roof. The recruit emerges from the gully onto a kind of pebble causeway spilling out onto the valley floor and then crosses the very boggy valley bottom, eroded down to its pebble base. At the bottom
the recruit passes over a fast-flowing stream about 2 m wide and then enters, on the other side, the next obstacle, the ‘crocodile pit’.

This is a 32 m-long water-filled and extremely muddy trench branching off laterally from the stream that fills it, crossing the bog of the valley side to the south: ‘It’s really, really muddy, well thick mud, which adds more weight to you’ (recruit Paul). The main difficulty here is not the water but the thick, red, cloying mud sticking to and weighing down the boots and the lower legs. The RM has protected this area, like Peter’s Pool, from erosion by the dumping of gorse bales next to the stream. Emerging from this the recruit clambers up a wooden ramp, entering a woodland area.

The path now winds up a slope through the woodland, along a broad dirt track that is easy to run along. It then diverges to the left. The recruit must now follow the course of a muddy, water-filled depression about 0.5 m deep, skirting another boggy area (trainers, as elsewhere, walk along relatively dry ground beside it). Beyond this water-filled feature (about 30 m long) the path continues along the margins of the bog but is eroded through the dark, peaty soil to the pebble base, meandering through clumps of moor grass. After about 200 m the course bears left and rises up and out of the valley over a small, low spur.
The recruit now arrives at the ‘Smartie Tubes’, named after the popular sweets packaged in long, thin cardboard tubes. These are two parallel, dark, partially water-filled pipes, dirty and foul smelling, 70 cm in diameter and 20 m long. It is easy to get stuck in them, particularly with kit slung around the belt. The recruit, carefully keeping his weapon away from the water, must drag himself through these on the belly, grunting as he moves; a lot of the recruits will be vomiting.

Totally pitch black … You’ve got to work your way through them all the way through to the end and if you’re claustrophobic … and it’s all a race … all the water’s splashing around you, you’ve got to keep your head high, so as to not take in the water … and you’ve just got to get through there as quick as you can; all you are thinking about is time.

(Recruit Paul)

Immediately after exiting they stand up, only to have to immediately stoop down and enter a single rectangular dry tunnel with corrugated iron sides, whose entrance is 70 cm wide and 1 m high with a wooden façade. This tunnel, 20 m long, is bent and dark. It lowers from the entrance, swinging around to the left at both ends. On exiting, the final stretch of the course continues through pine trees, rising up a slope to RV9.

The recruit then picks up his cap comforter, the hat worn through training, from where he has left it on the ground, runs back to CTC at Lympstone, mercifully largely down-slope from RV9, and, in a state of exhaustion, fires at the target and hopefully hits it six times – all within the 73 allotted minutes.

At the end of it when you are knackered and your knees are killing you and you have ripped your hands apart you hope you can actually fire your weapon and hit the target.

(RM Lt Col)

The recruit is hardly aware of the landscape through which he periodically runs, crawls, wades or completely submerges himself in water. He moves through rather than sees it. Constantly aware of the clock ticking he has no time for any aesthetic consideration of the landscape, history, archaeology or wildlife. His eyes must be down most of the time because of the unstable pebble surfaces and boggy ground which he has to cross. When he looks ahead is when he is crawling through the dark tunnels,
desperate to get through them somehow and emerge into the light at the end. He is both water-sodden and covered with mud; his clothes and kit, swung around the belt, weigh increasingly heavily and drag his body down. He must at all times take care of his weapon, protect it from harm, while being unable to protect his own body from physical assault. The recruit must be totally absorbed in the task and his body in motion suffers a kind of sensory amnesia: ‘Personally you just get there, you get broken’ (Recruit James).

The whole point of this training is to try and remain unaffected by the different sensory experiences to which he subjects himself and his body, to any thoughts outside the task. The endurance course thus encourages and instils a single-mindedness oblivious to either the landscape through which he moves or specific sensory experiences encountered along the way: constriction, darkness, unstable and slippery surfaces, ground that moves below you and sucks you down, wetness, cold, pain and exhaustion. The body must become a kind of machine in which ordinary sensory experience becomes dehumanized, and the experience of landscape becomes disembodied. This fits perfectly, in an extreme form, Leder’s (1980) general argument that the body automatically ‘fades’ from conscious experience when people are engaged in purposeful activity. It is both present and absent, but in this case pain constantly reminds the recruit of its existence. Another way to understand this is in terms of Csikszentmihaly’s (1990) concept of ‘flow’. This is a state of consciousness in which a person is completely absorbed in an activity so that they forget themselves within it. Action and awareness become merged, distractions are excluded, self-consciousness disappears, sense of time becomes distorted and the activity becomes an end in itself with a merging of awareness into it rather than the surroundings.

The endurance course becomes, for the recruit, a kind of liminal, betwixt-and-between rite of passage in two senses. It is highly significant that all of the RM we asked to draw cognitive maps for us of the heathland depict the endurance course in varying degrees of detail. In particular it is the worst bits of the course – Peter’s Pool, the ‘sheep dip’ or water tunnels and the crocodile pit – that stick in the mind and that are shown (see Figures 3.3–3.6).

The endurance course is a test, which the recruit must undertake and succeed at in order to pass out at the end as a RM. In order to do this, he must anaesthetize his body, try as much as possible to disconnect it from the landscape through which he moves and from the sensory assaults on his body; the less he feels or experiences anything the better. This is in direct
contrast to other aspects of RM training which all emphasize – for example, in camouflage and concealment and stalking tactics – sensory awareness of an involvement in the landscape. A well-concealed recruit must instead attempt to become part of it, immerse himself in its particularity.

Undertaking the task involves aspects of cooperation and teamwork and competition between recruits, like most other aspects of RM training. Recruits need to help each other out, encourage each other to go on, through obstacles such as the water pipes. Each recruit also wants to excel personally, to do the best he can, not to fail the test because of others.

Conservation issues

I’ve been to my first East Devon Pebblebeds Conservation committee meeting and I was like the Emperor in new clothes, the little boy in the back, and I said ‘who decides what is natural then?’ And you could see the look on their faces with NE looking slightly askance at me … All I’d say is that our impacts on the ecology is minimized, responsible, and on occasions quite positive in terms of the environment.

(RM Lt Col)

On some days on Woodbury Common there is a rather different kind of dawn chorus than one might expect in a wildlife conservation area: rapid and repeated gunfire that may last for a considerable period of time, followed by an eerie silence. This may similarly occur at dusk as these are the favoured times for RM tactical battlefield exercises, attacking an enemy position at a time when it will be least expected. Sometimes what you thought were bushes start to move. Unexpectedly gunfire and smoke can break out from a copse, troops emerge and start to run across the landscape at any time during the day. In the dead of night suddenly the entire landscape will be brilliantly illuminated by high-flying flares descending gradually to the ground on their small parachutes while shadowy figures can be observed crossing the landscape. These are some of the day-to-day realities of military training visible to the general public.

All RM recruits are informed that Woodbury Common is an important landscape from the point of view of nature conservation and that they should respect it and not leave litter lying around. They usually receive a lecture about this at CTC at an early stage in their training cycle by the Commons Warden, Bungy Williams, (himself an ex-Royal Marine,
who regularly uses the RV terminology to refer to specific places in the landscape), and the official who manages the land area for Ministry of Defence Estates. In general the RM are extremely sensitive to public relations issues and do their utmost to maintain a good image of themselves and the manner in which they use Woodbury Common for training. They are well aware that as an organized and highly visible presence they constitute an easy and ready target for potential criticism compared with other user groups on the Commons. Their efforts are largely successful in that very few members of the general public are openly hostile to their presence; the vast majority readily accept that ‘they need somewhere to train’ and are generally supportive. Only a few individuals we talked to were critical and wished they were gone. Apart from their general presence these criticisms related to noise frightening dogs and litter being left around. The RM are absolutely scrupulous about removing litter and, apart from the absence of ground vegetation in woodland areas where they camp out, they usually leave no trace behind. They even rotate their harbour areas in woodland on a regular basis in order to minimize their effect on the environmentally sustainable forestry policy of CDE.

Most litter is left behind accidentally, for example a recruit packing up quickly who leaves a box of bullet cartridges behind. There is also litter that cannot be removed because it is concealed in the dense heathland vegetation: remains of flares or smoke cartridges, or spent bullet casings. This material, concealed and invisible as it generally is, is to be found everywhere across Woodbury Common. The RM perform litter picks across the Commons on a regular basis and the majority of the material they find has been dropped by members of the general public rather than themselves: ‘when we did the rubbish sweep just before Easter [2010, using 100 recruits] there were sixty-eight bin liners with trash; all but two had civilian rubbish in’ (Lt Col).

Heath wildfires have been caused by the RM in the past and still occur today. As a consequence there is now a pyrotechnic ban during the summer months when the ground is dry. In general the RM feel responsible for the area and can get upset when they see members of the general public trashing it, lighting fires and dropping litter. Since they are often crawling across the ground a particularly unpleasant problem for them is dog mess left on the ground in the vicinity of car park areas by the general public:

I mean I’ve got no problem with the locals using it and that, obviously it’s for everybody but, you know, a lot of people do abuse it. Use if for somewhere to take their dog, you know, for a walk and
do their business and they just don’t clear it up after themselves, they’re a big hazard I think.

(George, Trainer)

They [the public] are dead quick to pick up brass and pyrotechnics and complain to us but they are not so keen on picking up the dog shit. It’s more dangerous all the diseases that are in the dog mess.

(Trainer and Sergeant)

The almost continuous presence of the RM on Woodbury Common has other potential benefits in that it deters fly tipping (although this still occasionally takes place) and off-road driving by four-wheel-drive vehicles and BMX motorbikes. Similarly deliberate arson attacks can be spotted or prevented and wildfires reported and more speedily put out though cooperation between the RM, the fire brigade and CDE. The RM are keen to emphasize these benefits and other environmentally friendly factors relating to their use of Woodbury Common, contrasting with the manner in which the public more regularly abuse heathland areas in other parts of the UK that lack a military presence. Some members of the general public, particularly women, say they feel safe walking on the Commons because of the RM presence. Since it is only a few kilometres distant from the CTC base at Lympstone its use keeps the RM’s carbon footprint relatively low. If they were not able to use the heathlands for training they would have to go much further afield to Dartmoor or other military training areas on a much more frequent basis. Beyond this the presence of the CTC base at Lympstone greatly benefits the local economy.

On the other hand the RM’s effects on wildlife in general and endangered species in particular is unknown. There can be little doubt that their presence during the day and the night, the movements of recruits across the landscape, the noise and disturbance caused by fire-fights and mock battles, grenades, flares, smoke canisters and so on must be detrimental to a greater or lesser extent. This is so especially in relation to the two rare and endangered species of nesting birds likely to be most disturbed, the nightjar and the Dartford warbler, the presence of which has led to the SSSI and SPA designations. Members of the general public – walkers, horse riders, cyclists, etc. – seldom cross the Common during the night. They invariably keep to the major tracks and paths. The RM, by contrast, typically utilize other areas off the tracks. Indeed, for tactical reasons, the RM generally avoid tracks, given that in a combat situation it is precisely such routes that the enemy might
expect you to move along, places most vulnerable to attack. Recruits following bearings from one checkpoint to another try as far as possible to follow a straight line and carry on regardless of whatever lies in front of them. During their training exercises what is uppermost in the mind of the recruit is succeeding at the task in hand. They are not thinking about endangered bird species or conservation at all. They necessarily concentrate on trying, for example, to follow the bearing given to them and arriving at the checkpoint in good time, or stalking from A to B without being observed. When explicitly asked about the wildlife a typical response is that they ‘don’t really pay attention to it; it’s the job at hand for us … you don’t really have time to look at what’s going on around you’. Half the recruits interviewed at the Straight Point firing range and those training on Woodbury Common said they knew nothing about wildlife or endangered species on Woodbury Common.

It could be argued that disturbance caused by the general public is more or less limited to areas around car parks, major tracks and paths, while the RM potentially disturb the wildlife everywhere else. In this respect it is interesting to note the very limited use by the RM of the Aylesbeare and Harpford Common RSPB nature reserve for training. One can only surmise that this may be driven by RSPB and NE perceptions of its potentially deleterious effects. It should be noted however that official members of these and other conservation bodies are extremely reticent about making any critical comments with regard to the RM. Some, indeed, prefer to play up the positive deterrent benefits of their presence, as discussed above, against the deleterious effects of the activities of some members of the general public.

Some volunteer environmentalists have a far more critical perspective. Some speak of the Marines as being part of the ‘community’, part of the landscape, but two environmentalists who are not connected with the RSPB made clear their not-so-positive feelings regarding the military use of the landscape:

You’d just be wandering along, thinking your thoughts, looking at what’s going on. Suddenly a grenade would go off and, oh, I really resented the whole militaristic idea. It was entering my head, you know, a grenade would go off and I would enter into all sorts of reveries about that and things, and I thought that was a very interesting thing, you know, something happens and then your whole thoughts are skewed in a different way. You arrive there, in a natural sort of place, in which birds are singing and it’s all very peaceful and suddenly you get a military intrusion, and it does affect you, you know.
'What’s happening there?’ and the whole sort of militaristic comes into you. I used to resent that actually, at times, you know, when you’re up there for a bit of peace and quiet and suddenly a crump from the grenade range would go up and it would intrude into your peace and quiet if you’re up there for contemplative walking.

(First environmentalist)

This particular environmentalist views the heathland as a natural place and so does the other interviewee:

Yes, I find it a natural place except for, obviously, small pockets where you’ve got the quarry, and where the military charge around as well; I can never understand that but there you are … What I object to is you have the Military of Defence, defence against what? Why not Ministry of Interfering in Foreign Countries?

(Second environmentalist)

He acknowledges that a military presence in many areas in the UK has stopped the spread of suburbia and that the wildlife is often ‘absolutely superb’. His objection in this instance appears then to be more political than concerned with potential damage or noise. As has been said, many others appreciate the presence of the Marines. One reason given is that their manoeuvres help keep the heathland’s vegetation down, which aids in the construction of an appropriate habitat for certain wildlife:

It’s a bit of disturbance but essentially it’s just human footfall and they’re keeping the paths open, they’re scuffing up bits of bare earth. So, you know, as long as it’s not in the same area every single day of the year, come rain or shine, it’s going to have a small impact.

(Commons warden)

Like other users of the heathlands, the majority of the environmentalists feel the Marine presence offers the heathland protection: ‘The Royal Marines go up there and they’re the nearest thing to a police force; they’re a presence, an authority, with much more presence than the wardens could give and they don’t really do any damage’ (Environmental volunteer).

It might be the case that the RM has little or only a very limited impact on endangered species. In this respect it can be noted that these species are still present despite seventy years of continuous training by
the RM Commandos and a long military use of the Commons going back to the Napoleonic wars and earlier. In one of the most intensively used training areas, East Budleigh Common, nightjars are in fact more frequent than in other areas. What is entirely unknown is whether if the RM ceased to use the area bird populations would significantly increase, or remain the same, or perhaps even decline as a result of an inevitable increase in the deleterious effects of irresponsible members of the general public. The historical presence of these endangered species is also unknown: were they present when the heathlands were intensively utilized for cattle and sheep grazing, furze or gorse cutting and peat extraction up until the 1940s? Or have they colonized the area in tandem with the RM and a drastic decline in economic exploitation which has allowed the gorse and heather to grow largely unhindered since the Second World War?

Landscape, embodiment and memory

When we leave here we all have memories so wherever we go we remember different parts of Woodbury Common and that’s a good thing. We’re all RM together and we remember Woodbury Common and when we leave the Core and we go out into the wider community we still remember Woodbury Common and the fun we had and the challenging sort of environment we soldiered in, so we are always spinning dits [stories] about ‘when I did training I remember when we did this exercise’ and Castle Feature, so people will talk about them in the Marine community. So wherever you are, if you are living in Australia or Spain, you will talk about Woodbury Common because it’s a common thread to everyone since World War II.

(RM Major)

Some officers and trainers said they tended to block out the bad memories of this landscape and only tended to remember the good times or amusing incidents:

None of it was really enjoyable because when you were up there you were under immense pressure; you were being tested and you knew that if you didn’t pass what you were doing at the time, you, you know it would affect you and you’d get, you know, removed from the training and put back.

(George, Trainer)
Whether enjoyable or not, the entire experience of training creates strong affective bonds between troops of recruits. They have common experiences and common memories of the landscape of Woodbury Common. This is what makes them distinctive from other parts of the British armed forces and gives them a unique identity. Woodward (1998), in a discussion of the UK military as a whole, asserts a generalized ‘rural’ identity for military people, as manifested in the manner in which they present themselves. This effectively ignores the particularities and effects of the different landscapes in which training takes place. Formative experiences are always particularly strong and for most recruits this is the first time they have lived away from home and encountered a landscape in which they must learn to live and endure. Weather may contribute significantly to the kinds of memories the RM have of the landscape and the stories they tell. While the general public avoid the Common during bad weather the RM do not have this option. A recruit who begins training in the autumn will have a significantly different experience than one who begins in the spring. The latter will do much of their training during the summer months in which physical conditions are much more benign on exercises such as the wet and dry routine and while navigating across the landscape. In winter Woodbury Common, even though it is near to urban centres, can feel incredibly bleak, inhospitable and remote.

Since all RM Commandos have trained on Woodbury Common, carrying out similar kinds of exercises in different parts of the heathlands, the experience of this landscape creates a wider common bond between all members of the RM, whether or not they have trained together in the same recruit troop. It forms a fundamental element in their personal biographies. Thus this particular landscape is key to social bonding and their identities. It is an active force that maintains their difference from other UK fighting forces, and far more important than their uniforms and green berets in establishing whom they are.

RM can thus share ‘dits’ about their experiences in their landscape wherever they might be on active service: Afghanistan, Iraq, the Arctic or Sierra Leone. Memories of landscape get passed down from generation to generation in the form of these dits. These shared memories are particularly powerful amongst those who have trained together in the same recruit troop: ‘We talk about Woodbury Common, Woodbury rash, crawling through the gorse, picking bits of gorse from your legs a few weeks later that are still emerging, you talk about that, Peter’s Pool and the endurance course’ (Captain and Trainer). They can all refer to the same named places, the grenade range and features of the endurance course.
These form the common memory of the landscape on the part of officers, shared reference points in their understanding of their taskscapes.

The RM not only share these place names but also those of named individual exercises taking place in different parts of the landscape, e.g. exercise Marshall Star, a three-and-a-half-day training exercise on Bicton Common involving fieldwork skills, obstacle crossing undertaken in Week 7 and the Baptist Run, a two-day exercise to test stalking and map-reading skills that takes place on Colaton Raleigh Common (RV19) during Week 15 of the training programme.

Officers training recruits recall when they were themselves recruits undertaking the same exercises in different areas of Woodbury Common. Crucially it is being in and re-visiting these places that powerfully brings forth these memories: ‘I sometimes walk around and I can remember training here, doing this. I can remember a wood block just over the other side [of the valley] there that I harboured up in exactly. I can still think of the tree I hung my poncho up on. I could point it out now’ (Sergeant Tim). Some trainers remarked that they were saddened by the manner in which the Black Hill quarry had encroached on this landscape and swallowed up areas that they themselves remembered and had trained in.

Conclusions: in and out of landscape

The relationship between the RM and the landscape is both peculiarly intense and peculiarly multifaceted. On the one hand, in order to endure aspects of their training, such as night navigation exercises following a bearing or running around the endurance course, they must learn to inure themselves from the landscape, block it out and ignore everything that it throws at them as much as possible. In this respect their experience of the landscape necessarily has to become disembodied. It ideally becomes little more than an irrelevant matrix of obstacles to the RM body getting from A to B in a limited amount of time.

On the other hand this landscape becomes embodied and remembered in an extraordinarily profound way. It is in and part of every RM body. Appropriate strategies for movement across it involve an extraordinary attention to topographic detail and the nature of the vegetation. The RM body ideally dissolves itself into this landscape, becomes part and parcel of it, all the time acutely aware of the sensory impacts of presence and movement involving touch, sight and sound. Marines must learn how to feel, observe and listen to this landscape in an acute manner. Such
is their involvement in the landscape that it forms a fundamental formative part of their collective identity as Royal Marines, and significantly constructs and structures their personal biographies.

The insights from Mauss and Foucault with regard to bodily practices, routines and discipline have provided many helpful insights for this account but what is lacking in the work of both is the observation of actual bodies (persons) and routines. In this sense their accounts of the body and embodiment are simply decontextualized ideal types and theoretical constructs. Here we have attempted to construct an alternative account through field observation in a particular landscape context to produce hopefully a more nuanced and contextualized account. In particular we have attempted to demonstrate the manner in which persons and their bodies cannot be understood apart from the landscapes of which they are a part, reciprocally involved in forms of movement, action, awareness and social memory. For the RM Woodbury Common is no ordinary landscape, for what they learn there profoundly contributes to their understanding and relationship with all the other landscapes in which they find themselves. They take Woodbury Common with them throughout the world and it provides an essential medium for their understanding and recursive relationship to that world.