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THE MILITARY DOES NOT WANT ME

Courtney Brogno

I'm not sure when my dislike for the military began. Maybe it was when I was in the third grade and my uncle came back from his six-year stint in the Army. No longer was he the cool, fun uncle that used to throw me into the air and catch me; now he was overly serious and controlling. My dislike also might have come from high school when military recruiters would come to our school campus to promote joining one of the branches of the military—the Army, the Navy, the Marines, or the Air Force—in exchange for a paid college tuition. Not even my love for the movie *Top Gun* made me want to give up a college education (or at least, delay that education) to be part of a group. Or maybe it was my complete disdain for the way our country conducts itself in foreign affairs, or my dislike of authority and conformity, or perhaps even my absolute hatred of intense workouts, translated to what I knew of basic training. Whatever the reason, I was not interested in the military and, in all honesty, I was probably the last person the government wanted in their service anyway.

That is why, last fall, when the *Moebius* Board came together to discuss this issue, I jumped at the chance to interview a local military recruiter. The Board thought interviewing a military recruiter would be a perfect fit for the theme of the issue: Controversy. And I agreed. Plus, I believed it would be a great way for me to educate myself as well as understand my natural inclinations to dislike what I do not know. This was going to be a fair chance for me to broaden my knowledge base.

As I dug into my research preparing for my interview, I found some startling statistics. According to many news sources, military recruiting is down in the past couple of years, yet Defense Department officials consistently announce that recruiting and reten-

tion rates are on the upswing. The discrepancy is, obviously, seen in the people who are recruited. According to the *Boston Globe*, “the armed forces, already struggling to meet recruiting goals, are considering expanding the number of noncitizens in the ranks—including disputed proposals to open recruiting stations overseas and putting more immigrants on a faster track to U.S. citizenship if they volunteer—according to Pentagon officials.”¹ Although this seems a bit disturbing, *USA Today* reports that, “About 17% of the first-time recruits, or about 13,600, were accepted under waivers for various medical, moral or criminal problems, including misdemeanor arrests or drunk driving. That is a slight increase from last year, the Army said. Of those accepted under waivers, more than half were for “moral” reasons, mostly misdemeanor arrests. Thirty-eight percent were for medical reasons and 7% were drug and alcohol problems, including those who may have failed a drug test or acknowledged they had used drugs.”² And while this may be shocking, other current problems that plague the military seem even worse.

Many recent allegations have plagued the military and the effects are being seen with a decrease in public support. According to *CBS News*, “More than 100 young women who expressed interest in joining the military in the past year were preyed upon sexually by their recruiters. Women were raped on recruiting office couches, assaulted in government cars and groped en route to entrance exams.”³ Also, Garfield High School in Washington voted to adopt a resolution that says military recruiters must stay out of their high school. Plus, on March 20 of this year, there was a nationwide “Student Day Action Against the War” aimed at high schools across America. Much of the public discord against recruiters and the war stems in part from the decline in President Bush’s approval rating and the new Democratic congress making it clear that they do not support Bush’s plan to send more troops into Iraq.

With all of this information tumbling around in my head, I wrote out some questions and drove down to the local military recruiter’s office in the Marigold center off Broad and Tank Farm in San Luis Obispo. I walked up to the door only to find it locked with no sign of anyone inside. It was 9 A.M., and since I couldn’t find a sign showing hours of operation, I walked away. Later, in my office at Cal Poly, I called the recruitment office. A polite man answered, and when I explained my intent to conduct an interview, he was more than happy to oblige and told me to come down anytime, they open at 8 A.M. I stated that I would come the next morning but that I had already been there that day at nine, and no one was there. Adamantly, he stated that I must have been at the wrong building because they are *always* on time. Now, I’m not the most map savvy person, but I do know that I was at the military recruiter’s office that morning. In fact, the large sign and posters of tanks and guns assured me that I was in the right place. However, I let it all slide and ended with a cordial, “Thank you. You’re right, I was probably at the wrong place. See you tomorrow.”

Well, the next day came, as well as multiple Cal Poly commitments, thus deeming I move my interview back a week or so. Again I called the recruiting office, and spoke to another man. I explained that I was supposed to come in for an interview but would it be possible for me to come the following week. With assured confidence and a kind demeanor, the gentleman informed me that I could come down for an interview any time I wanted. They'd all be happy to talk to me.

So, two weeks later, I was in my car again, driving to the military recruiter's office. I was dressed casually—jeans and a sweater—with my hair pulled back in a pony tail. I felt confident. I had done my research and was intent on getting the opinion of someone in the field. And, I am—regardless of the situation—always respectful. I had nothing but pleasant conversations with people in the office and felt that courtesy would be extended to my interview. I was dreadfully wrong.

I walked into a large office building with several halls and separate office corridors. To the left was a small office with a young man signing up for the Army, and to the right was a large office with several desks. At each desk were young men dressed casually in blue t-shirts and fatigue pants working on laptops. I walked up to one of the men, introduced myself, and explained that I was here for an interview. “You’re gonna to have to talk to the sergeant,” was the response from one of the men. I was directed toward the back of the room, where an older, large, muscular man sat staring at a computer. I walked back, reintroduced myself, and explained my interview. Without looking up, he commented, “You work for Cal Poly?”

After explaining that yes, I do teach at Cal Poly, and further explaining exactly what *Moebius* is, I was met with stiff resistance. “All interviews have to be approved for publication and all questions must be pre-approved as well,” the sergeant replied. I then further explained that I had called—twice—and been told that I could come down anytime for an interview. He didn't reply. After about two minutes of silence, I continued saying, “Well, is there a form I need to fill out where I can list my questions?” “Nope,” he replied, “and we'll need proof of your credentials.” It took me another full minute to reply that my credentials could be checked through human resources at Cal Poly. “Would you like me to leave you the number?” I asked. Still, no response. Finally, I asked if I could email him the number to human resources and my questions. His assistant (I believe) handed me the sergeant's card with an email address printed on it. With no further response from the sergeant, I left the office.

Later that day, confused by what had occurred, I emailed the sergeant all the information needed to check my credentials as well as my questions. I asked if I could be assured that I would have answer within a week. He replied to my email that he would forward it to his Public Affairs office and that I should hear back from them in less then a week. Exactly one week later, the chief of advertising and public affairs from the Los Angeles

recruiting battalion emailed me this response:

Dear Ms. Brogno,

Thank you for your offer of an interview with Staff Sergeant -----,
however, we decline.

I must admit that I was not too devastated by not getting the interview. While I tend to have an easy going and casual attitude, the Sergeant I would have been interviewing seemed to be the exact opposite. I didn't know how well I'd fair under the pressure of having to be that serious for the duration of the interview. I rarely get intimidated, and standing in that office was, indeed, the very essence of the word intimidating. And as much as I don't like authority, I dislike the feeling of intimidation even more: it makes me feel so weak, something I pride myself on not being. Thus, the email was almost a relief.

But, in case you're interested, here are the questions I was planning on asking:

1. How long has this recruiting center been active?
2. On average how many recruits do you get a month?
3. Do most recruits just walk in? Or do you obtain most recruits via high school visits?
4. According to *CBS News*, this is the lowest Army recruiting period in years. Do you see this at your recruiting center? Do you feel pressured to up your recruiting numbers?
5. Given the current political climate regarding the war in Iraq, do you feel the lessening of public support for the war is affecting the number of recruits in the nation?
6. How do you feel about certain high schools—for example, Garfield High School in Seattle, Washington—voting against military recruiting on high school campuses?
7. Even though many high schools are not voting against military recruiting, on March 20, 2007 there is a nation wide “Student Day Action Against the War” protest, and already 60 campuses have signed on. That, plus the recent Feb. 15th anti-war protest at UCSB, in Santa Barbara, shows a significant increase in student action against the war. Do you see this type of climate occurring when you visit high school and/or college campuses?
8. In February, *The Baltimore Sun* wrote that there was “a significant increase in the number of recruits with what the Army terms ‘serious criminal misconduct’ in their background—a category that included “aggravated assault, robbery, vehicular manslaughter, receiving stolen property and making terrorist threats.” From 2004-2005, the number of these recruits rose by more than 54%. What is your response to the *Baltimore Sun's* claim?

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9. Finally, what would you say to a young man or woman right out of high school who walked into this office interested in joining the military, but still unsure of his/her decision?

Well, as much as I consider myself an easy going type of girl, I do think that my questions were serious, although not ardent nor heated. But, war and the military is serious, as they should be. Maybe in the end, it wasn't so much my fear of conformity or of fighting a war with no end in sight that made me dislike the military; perhaps, really, it was my fear of looking at the heart of the machine—the heart of death and turmoil and imperialism—which would, undoubtedly, make me constantly question the very country I live in. And since I can't move—my Irish citizenship hasn't gone through yet—then what am I to do? How do I work against this machine? This, though, is exactly why the military did not allow the interview. This is why all questions must be approved before any interviews. Because, just what if, the citizens of this country saw into the heart of this machine? How would we react? How would it feel to know the truth? This is a frightening thought, and one the military doesn't want to face. Sometimes, I suppose (at least according to the military), the wizard should stay behind the curtain. 

Notes

1. USA Today, "Lower Standards Help Army Meet Recruiting Goal." Oct. 9, 2006
http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2006-10-09-army-recruiting_x.htm
2. Ibid.
3. CBS News "Sexual Abuse by Military Recruiters" august 20, 2006
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/08/19/national/main1913849.shtml>