



The Home Front

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The Home Front: Contexts

The Home Front (2009–2012) explores the uneasy relationship between militarism and entertainment, from public air shows held at Royal Air Force (RAF) bases and British seaside resorts to the Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI) arms trade fair held at London's ExCel Centre. Whilst the United Kingdom's disastrous involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, when airstrikes killed vast numbers of civilians, provided the crucial background for *The Home Front*, there were also several personal inspirations for the work.

In 1999, Luarda, a four-year-old Kosova Albanian girl, was airlifted with her family to the UK following several months in a Macedonian refugee camp, where I had photographed her for my book *No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo*¹. Shortly after the family's arrival in Southport, Luarda's mother told me of her daughter's terror when the Red Arrows (RAF fighter jets) screamed over the beach in an acrobatic display as part of the Southport Air Show. For Luarda the sight and sound of the fighter jets was not entertainment, but a reminder of her experiences during the war in Kosovo. This acute difference in perception and context stayed with me.

Another influence was an 1843 print of the *Aerial* steam carriage, which always hung on my parents' living room wall, depicting a mid-nineteenth-century crowd looking up at a flying machine above what may be London's Hampstead Heath. It was a public relations image—printed several decades before the Wright brothers' first successful flight. In reality, the *Aerial* never actually flew². This got me thinking about spectacle, spectators, fantasy and staging—and aviation.

During the making of my previous work *Border Country* (2007) which focused on immigration detainees, I was escorted down into the grassy "dry moat" surrounding Dover Citadel, which was built during the Napoleonic Wars and now functions as an immigration removal center. Suddenly a fighter jet screeched past above the surveillance cameras, which were scanning the moat for possible escaped asylum seekers.



Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4



Fig 5



Fig 6



Fig 7



Fig 8

I was struck by the conjunction of nineteenth-century defenses, the twenty-first-century surveillance equipment, and the roar of the contemporary fighter jet rehearsing for a distant theatre of war:

In the 1980s, as a young photojournalist, I'd documented both the women's peace camp at RAF / US Air Force Greenham Common, and Farnborough Air Show. In 2008 a return visit to Farnborough galvanized me into action. I wanted to look at 'the perennial seductiveness of war' discussed by Susan Sontag³, but as experienced on the home front, rather than in the conflict zone. I had become increasingly aware of the burgeoning culture of war at home: how war can be promoted by celebrating fighter jets at air shows, and how militarization is normalized and 'woven into the fabric of civic culture'⁴. In 2007 Colonel David Allfrey, head of the army's recruitment strategy, commented that: "It starts with a seven-year-old boy seeing a parachutist at an air show and thinking, 'That looks great'. From then the army is trying to build interest by drip, drip, drip."⁵ Air shows are advertised as a "fun day out" for the family, and the humorous yet perturbing scenes of tank rides, Living History re-enactments and armed forces' recruitment drives in *The Home Front* contribute to a sense of disconnection with the reality of war.

After an initial period of photographing at inland RAF bases, I was drawn in a new direction by seeing the tranquil Thames estuary at Southend disrupted by the Red Arrows. I began to document the beach as a temporarily militarized space. Fighter jets roaring across the sky above timeless scenes of children playing on the sands felt like a disturbing combination. Spending long days on the beaches, returning to a working method of waiting and observing, I was drawn also to the incredible variety of the skies. But as Pys Gruffudd points out, the sky, following the Second World War, is "anything but reassuring."⁶

At air shows I witnessed, displays by Avro Lancaster bombers and Spitfires, part of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, alternated with "shock and awe" performances by contemporary fighters (Tornado GR4, Eurofighter Typhoon) deployed in recent conflict zones; civilian aircraft displays were interwoven with military. I was fascinated by the theatricality at Southport Air Show in particular (Fig. 4), where displays by Hawker Hunters and Tornado fighters were staged over extensive sands, which had the feel of a desert. The following extract from the tannoy commentary, which accompanied the Tornado GR4 display at UK air shows, asked spectators to imagine themselves in Afghanistan, and feel the fear and apprehension of a soldier or a pilot:

The sequence you are about to see is based on a typical scenario that UK Tornado crews witness daily on operations in Afghanistan. Prior to the arrival of the aircraft, please try and imagine that you are on the ground in a secure location in Helmand Province, observing a small patrol of coalition troops as they move towards a possible hostile compound.⁷

While the beach images form the core of *The Home Front* work, the exhibition was tripartite. The second part included images of air show visitors engaging with the on-ground attractions of the "fun day out;" the third section comprised photographs taken at the trade days of the largest air shows (Farnborough and Paris), and at the Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI) arms fair at London's Excel Centre. Here the marketing of war is more overt; displays of weapons in a trade fair environment felt deeply shocking, but at least there were no children trying them out. Then at the Pakistan Ordnance Factory (POF) a young man suddenly threw himself onto the red carpet with a sniper rifle to be photographed by his companion: a chilling echo of the *carnavalesque* scenes I had witnessed at army recruitment stands at the air

shows. That night the stand was closed down because, as it turned out, it had been illegally promoting banned cluster bombs.⁸

Fig. 1 Hawk T1 military trainers (Red Arrows), Clacton Air Show, Essex, August 26, 2010.

Fig. 2 Eurofighter Typhoon combat aircraft, Eastbourne International Air Show, Sussex, August 15, 2009.

Fig. 3 Avro Lancaster bomber (part of The Battle of Britain Memorial Flight), Eastbourne International Air Show, Sussex, August 15, 2009.

Fig. 4 Hawker Hunter fighter, Southport Air Show, Merseyside, July 24, 2011.

Fig. 5 Living History group area, with 1940s mobile canteen, Biggin Hill International Air Fair, Kent, June 27, 2009.

Fig. 6 Visitors to the air show and Living History group re-enactors watch display by Hawk T1 military trainers (Red Arrows), RAF Waddington International Air Show, Lincolnshire, July 2, 2011.

Fig. 7 MBDA Missiles display stand, Le Bourget, Paris Air Show, June 15, 2009.

Fig. 8 Pakistan Ordnance Factory (POF), Defence and Security Equipment International arms fair, ExCel Centre, London, September 15, 2011.

Notes

- 1 Midnight Editions, San Francisco, 2001.
- 2 Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aerial_steam_carriage, accessed 3 August 2015.

3 Susan Sontag, "Looking at War," *New Yorker*, December 9, 2002.

4 Jody Berland and Blake Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*. Special Issue: Cultures of Militarisation, 23–24 (2010): 9.

5 David Gee's independent report *Informed Choice: Armed Forces Recruitment Practice in the United Kingdom* cited in Stephen Armstrong, "Britain's Child Army," *New Statesman*, February 5, 2007.

6 Prys Gruffudd, "Reach for the Sky: The Air and English Cultural Nationalism," *Landscape Research* 16, no. 20 (1991): 24.

7 Text supplied courtesy of the RAF; published on the back cover of *The Home Front* book.

8 The POF stand was closed down by DSEI after intervention by Amnesty International and the Green Party owing to the display of leaflets promoting banned cluster bombs (Nick Hopkins, "Companies Ejected from London Arms Fair for 'Promoting Cluster Bombs,'" *Guardian*, September 16, 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/16/ejected-arms-fair-cluster-bombs>).

Credits

The Home Front is an Impressions Gallery touring exhibition comprising 36 images. It was curated by Pippa Oldfield, and was first shown in autumn 2013 at Impressions Gallery. The Home Front book was published in 2013 by Dewi Lewis Publishing in association with Impressions Gallery.

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Some sentences in this article resemble material published on Friend's website <http://www.melaniefriend.com>

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