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**‘On Behalf of the Nation’
A Sociological Study of the Wootton Bassett
Repatriations.**

Aline Judith Gaus

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Department of Sociological Studies,
The University of Sheffield

Abstract

With the Wootton Bassett rituals, a new landmark was set for British war commemoration. After six years of quiet military repatriations of fallen soldiers through another airbase, the flights had to be rerouted to RAF Lyneham and the hearses carrying the flag-draped coffins now passed through the heart of the nearby Wootton Bassett on their 50-mile journey to a military hospital in Oxford. Unexpectedly, this contingency triggered a series of events that gave birth to a community-led, local ritual that had remarkable national impact.

This thesis is based on an in-depth ethnographic study that tells the story of the start, the consolidation and the end of this unusual and unprecedented ritual practice to commemorate the fallen and pay respect to them and their families. It takes advantage of this highly unusual opportunity to follow a process of ritualisation from its beginning, and explores how in this case ritual was employed to make sense of an unexpected and hitherto unexperienced situation, and to manage the emotional charge of that situation. In addition, the study also analyses the effect of this phenomenon and locates it within its social, cultural, historical and political context.

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Acknowledgements

Not very long ago, I started rock climbing as so many people do in Sheffield, where the Peak District with its majestic gritstone edges is just at our doorstep. Leading a route up a rockface is very similar to doing a PhD. There will be sections that feel easy and technically feasible, whereas others can be extremely challenging both mentally and technically. Every move has to be figured out, step by step, and the safety of the situation assessed and managed. Climbing can be scary and climbers try to challenge themselves to see what they can do in terms of their physical abilities but also to see whether they have the nerve and confidence to go further. But if one keeps at it, keeps a cool mind and has the right support, then a lot is possible.

This thesis, this long and sometimes dreadful route I decided to climb, was a challenge that I could only finish because I had the help and support of many kind people. Whenever I thought I could not go any further, felt I was stuck, scared or simply did not know how to get beyond that point, these people looked out for me. Going above and beyond his role as a supervisor, Richard Jenkins was my belayer, my 'Doktorvater', the person who held the other end of the rope. He was there all the way with me, he caught my falls and gave me the confidence to keep going even when I thought I didn't have the strength to go any further. With his experience and invaluable advice, he guided me safely all the way up this hard route, and I am more than grateful for this. Thanks Richard for being my 'fail safe' and an inspiration.

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Aline

Ethnographic conventions

In this thesis, I have used direct quotes from written and audio material. All interviews were transcribed using the conventions below, in order to allow the reader to grasp the whole picture of the conversation that took place, including for instance moods and hesitations. Data from textual sources was also used and, if quoted directly, careful attention was paid to keep the material in its original form. In case any changes were made to ensure the readability, these were done according to the conventions below.

- ...//... Material edited out.

- [...]

- ... Signifies a break in the flow of speech.

Introduction

On 15th October 2011, I met with James Gray, the Conservative MP for North Wiltshire, for an interview about the events in Wootton Bassett, a town in his constituency. An event of enormous importance was scheduled for the following day: in a grand ceremony attended by thousands of people, Wootton Bassett would receive the Queen's letters patent that would change its name to *Royal Wootton Bassett*. This very rare honour was awarded to the townspeople of this small market town in Wiltshire, Southwest England, in recognition of the respect they had shown to the fallen soldiers that had been repatriated through their town centre for four years and five months between 2007 and 2011. I would like to start this thesis with a quote from this interview with James Gray about the importance of the events that had unfolded. He explained to me:

I think an in-depth analysis of Wootton Bassett itself would come to the conclusion I just laid out for you: namely that it was an entirely impromptu low-grade, not low-grade, not low... ordinary event and therefore sociologically not particularly interesting...

He could not be more wrong. In the following two hundred and something pages of this thesis, I will not only tell the extraordinary story of the Wootton Bassett repatriations but also explain how these events are not just of great value from a sociological perspective. Most importantly, they represent a significant landmark in the national historical and political record, which has been put firmly on the map of British history through the Royal Accolade.

It has only been since 2001 that the bodies of British servicemen and -women who die overseas have been repatriated for burial. In April 2007, the first of many repatriation cortèges passed through the centre of Wootton Bassett, a sleepy little provincial town in Southwest England. Word had spread and people spontaneously gathered along the High Street to mark the hearses' passing with a simple solemn tribute to the fallen. Gradually, over the next four years, these initially improvised gatherings developed into a ritualised response to the frequent repatriation cortèges. The Wootton Bassett repatriation rituals – and the unexpected empathetic response of these 'ordinary' people (and notably not the state or the military at this point) – were lauded by the public, gaining extensive national and international recognition. Even US President Barack Obama praised the efforts of the town in a speech, emphasising that it 'represents the best of British character' (*BBC News* 21/07/2010). More importantly, this particular way of paying respect to, and memorialising, the fallen in the town of Wootton Bassett was broadly supported

by the British public because it set a different tone for national war commemoration, one that seemed to appeal to individuals on a very basic human level.

Between 2007 and 2011, the townspeople and visitors witnessed 167 repatriations ceremonies and paid respect to 345 British soldiers, their flag-shrouded coffins, and their families. The Wootton Bassett repatriations ended due to the planned closure of the local airbase and the repatriations were re-routed to a different airbase. During the four and a half years of repatriations, however, the hearses drove regularly through the small town centre. Otherwise the vibrant core of everyday life, the heart of the town, Wootton Bassett's High Street, on an almost weekly basis, grew sombre and funereal as hundreds of people, sometimes even thousands, lined the way, placed flowers on the cars, held respectful silences and dipped their flags in honour of the fallen servicemen and -women whose bodies passed before them.

Fascinated by these extraordinary events, I started this research project in early 2010 and set out to undertake an in-depth ethnography of the way in which this town memorialised the fallen and paid their respects to the soldiers and their families. To my knowledge, this study is the first and only one of the Wootton Bassett repatriation phenomenon. It also offered a rather unusual opportunity to observe how ritual works from the start to the end, that is from the day a few people gathered spontaneously in April 2007 to the last repatriation in August 2011, which followed a clear ritual structure and was attended by thousands of people and broadcast to thousands more. I had the very rare chance to examine a time-limited episode of ritualisation, which offered a compressed window of opportunity within which to explore the conditions under which, and the practices by which, rituals associated with war, death and memorialisation emerge, and how they are maintained and negotiated by particular groups.

The analysis of the events discussed in this thesis focuses on two main themes: First, the links between the nation, the military, civil society and death. Here, I will examine the development of previous traditions of war commemoration practices in Britain and then explain how Wootton Bassett's show of respect during the repatriations struck a chord with the general public during the politically highly controversial conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The second theme examined in the following chapters is the question how ritual develops, emerges, stabilises and eventually was dismantled. This community-led local ritual in Wootton Bassett fascinated millions of people, drawing them into the ban of this simple show of respect for the soldiers and emotional support for the grieving families.

This study adds to our understanding of war and other memorialisation, collective identification processes, and the genesis and institutionalisation of rituals. It is an opportunity to engage analytically with a phenomenon of major public interest. In engaging in a scholarly discussion of public rituals of death and memorialisation in a politically-charged modern everyday setting, the research will bridge the gaps between public and private spheres of memory and ritual, and national politics and local traditions. In doing so, it will also make a powerful case for the continued relevance of ethnographic research and analysis.

There is also a chance to make a significant contribution to the historical record. This case is, as far as I am aware, unparalleled in the history of British war commemoration: whereas most memorialisation projects are officially-sponsored and state-led, the townspeople of Wootton Bassett started a civil society initiative, which addressed the contested legitimacy of this war in particular, and the memorialisation of wars in general. In the twenty-first century, Britain is confronted and challenged by the vague concept of ‘a war against terror’, by issues of internal fragmentation, by a flood of emotional pictures about war in the media, by the questioning of state actions, and by the very first systematic, public repatriations of war fatalities in its history. In this politically-laden context, this research project investigates social processes and events in relation not only to the local specifics of Wootton Bassett, but also the wider society.

This thesis consists of seven chapters and three photo essays serving as illustrations. In Chapter 1, I will locate this study within its historical context of war commemoration practices in Britain. From the institutionalisation of remembrance after the First World War to the challenges contemporary warfare puts on military death and the way modern soldiers can or should be mourned, this initial chapter will introduce the relevant scholarly literature in the field and discuss it. More has to be said though about the relationship between soldiers, citizens and the state. Nation-building projects have traditionally relied on conjuring up images of past wars and the human sacrifice they entail. Here, I will examine sociological literature on war and military death in particular. Cultures mark the passage from life to death through ritualisation, as was the case in Wootton Bassett. In the third and last part of this literature review, I will introduce key concepts and approaches to ritual theory and discuss how the making of ritual, which we were able to observe in Wootton Bassett, could best be theorised.

Chapter 2 is a description, explanation and discussion of the research design of this study. It outlines the research questions and methodology implicated that guided the process of writing this ethnography. As an in-depth study of a ritualisation process within a small town community, the fieldwork comprised an intense engagement with the townspeople over one and a half years. This chapter discusses the theoretical, methodological and ethical implications of this fieldwork and the relationships constructed in the course of it. It also allows the reader to gain a better understanding of the context in which this study was conducted.

The third chapter engages more closely with the town itself, its historical background and its close links with the military. Since the local airbase opened in close-by Lyneham in the 1940s, Wootton Bassett had been linked to the armed forces and the service personnel living in the town. In February 2005, the town experienced a proto-type repatriation event when a local aircrew died in Iraq and was repatriated through their homebase and the town's High Street. This chapter will also examine the unusual story of the War Memorial, which became the focus point of the repatriation ritual. Situated in the heart of the town, the memorial and the spaces surrounding it in the High Street offered themselves for public gatherings in many respects. And indeed, the spaces in the centre, the memorial and the town's history were vital factors in the initial emergence of the public ritual. Had the hearses with the flag-shrouded coffins not been driven right through the heart of this town, had there been a bypass, for example, none of this might have happened. The first photo essay following this chapter aims to illustrate the spaces and shows images of the War Memorial.

Following this, Chapter 4 will then introduce the repatriation ritual that is at the heart of this study. I will explain the process of the military repatriation and the regulations and procedures with respect to military death in active operational theatres. Operations Telic and Herrick, the MoD's names for the armed forces' engagement in Iraq (2003-2011) and Afghanistan (2001-2014) respectively, are then summarised in more detail, above all with respect to casualty and fatality rates. A detailed description of a 'typical' repatriation ritual is then offered. In addition, this chapter also analyses the participant groups and their specific roles within the ritual and the local community. The second photo essay shows images of a 'typical repatriation'.

Next, Chapter 5 engages directly with the process during which the initially improvised and partly accidentally ritual practices became more and more institutionalised. It starts with a discussion of the relevant literature and by arguing for an approach towards the study of ritual

that analyses ritual practice and performance as a process through which meaning is created and negotiated. This chapter follows closely this process of ritualisation, analysing how actors constructed ritual partly by improvisation, by accident and by tapping into their shared cultural repertoires of symbolic action. The individual key elements of the ritual will be traced back to when they were added and how this came about. It demonstrates the often contingent character of many of these incidents and additions to the ritual. This chapter is followed by the third and last photo essay about faces of the repatriations.

Having analysed what people do, i.e. ritual practice, in the previous chapter, Chapter 6 engages with the question of how these practices went through a process of validation from the 'outside world', which resulted in the stabilisation of the ritual. It follows the media coverage from the early years of 2007 and 2008 through the peak of the attention on Wootton Bassett in 2009 and 2010 to the wind-down of events in summer 2011, when the repatriations were moved to another town. This chapter analyses the emerging discourse and how the town fought to keep up their 'pure and simple' local narrative of events in the lights of often conflicting interpretations from the outside.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes this thesis with an in-depth discussion of the effects of the events in Wootton Bassett. It will explain how this ritual allowed people to partake emotionally as individuals, whilst joining into an empathic communion as a collective. It will critically discuss the question of public mourning and the dramatisation of grief in the media. The contemporary role of the soldier, will be discussed, as an important issue that prompts questions about heroism and the sacrifice in the name of the state and the nation. The discussion will then lead back to the themes we started off with in this thesis, namely memorialisation, identity and the nation.

Chapter 1 War, Memory and Death: Literature Review

War, memory and death: structural challenges and ritualisation

This chapter, locates my study of the repatriations in Wootton Bassett within an existing body of scholarly literature. This exercise provides the theoretical scaffolding for my analytical approach to the ritual that developed and the context within which it emerged. In the following paragraphs, I shall outline the theoretical concepts and deliberations at the base of this study. I will draw on previous research on identity, memory, ritual and death, and, in connection with the historical background provided in the next section, develop the basis for the argumentation in subsequent chapters.

Divided in three major parts, this literature review first situates these ritualised practices accompanying the repatriation cortèges in their historical context of war commemoration in Britain more generally. Here, I analyse in detail how the memorialisation of ‘sacrifice’ has emerged as an institutionalised practice in Britain over the past century, remembering the fallen both at a national and a local level. These practices, established after the Great War, still represent a yardstick for this country’s war commemoration. Today, structural changes and challenges within the complex relationship between the state, the military and society have found a platform for discussion and expression in and through the repatriation ritual in Wootton Bassett. This relationship is at the basis of the second part of this chapter, where I look more closely into the specific issue of death, both generally and in the specific case of military death. In the third part, I explore how meaning can be created, negotiated and proclaimed through the ritualised practices of collective memorialisation. During 2007-2011, Wootton Bassett witnessed the incremental ritualisation of social practices that marked the passing and the passage of those soldiers, who lost their lives on today’s battlefields. In order to grasp how this initially improvised local effort grew into a nationally recognised phenomenon, we need to create a better understanding of how ritualisation works and what the links between ritual, memory and collective identity are.

Wars, as markers of territories, nations and citizenship can play a decisive role in processes of identification. Along the lines of social theories of memory practices, I argue that the idea of

shared, common memories of the past creates a bond between people, allowing them to refer, in turn, to certain events, traits and ideas that mark them in their particularity and delimit the group to others. More importantly, wars have united people in the past in their struggles, their victories and their losses. They are emotionally powerful episodes in people's lives. This research on the repatriations in Wootton Bassett represents a unique chance to examine the evolution of a contemporary ritual of war commemoration, draw a historical comparison with the past, and link today's practices with the concepts of war, memory and identity.

A history of war commemoration in Britain

To discuss the repatriation ritual in Wootton Bassett today without reference to the past is to put the cart before the proverbial horse. Historically, societies have been confronted with wars, but the practices of commemoration and marking sacrifice have changed over time under the influence of new structural, cultural or political challenges. There are symbols such as the poppy¹, mantras like 'lest we forget' or 'we will remember them', murals, memorials, inscriptions in buildings, books, etc. – univocally, these practices and cultural artefacts refer to the idea of a mnemonic community, a group with shared memories of particular historic episodes. In the following paragraphs, the evolution of this complex triangular relationship between society, the state and the military will be examined by focussing on the development of the modern nation-state and the role of the institutionalisation of warfare in its process.

The Great War and the birth of contemporary war commemoration

A crucial turning point for the development of commemoration practices in Britain was the First World War, which had an unforeseen and unprecedented impact on society. The Great War is portrayed in the literature as a trigger for a boom of commemorative practices, which is still evident today, e.g. in the number of war memorials to be found in virtually every village or the two-minute silence observed each year in the UK on Remembrance Sunday and, ideally, at eleven o'clock on November 11th, the actual anniversary of the end of hostilities in 1918. Albeit war commemoration was common practice before, its key characteristics and extent changed considerably with the new challenges and changes the Great War brought about. Remembering

¹ Since 1922, the Royal British Legion's 'Poppy Appeal', raises funds for the charitable organisation by selling small poppy shaped badges and pins. Around November every year, millions wear these pins on their lapels – a practice which is considered appropriate, perhaps even mandatory, for politicians, members of the Royal Family and others in the public spotlight. At times, however, the poppy was seen as a contentious symbol, due to its reference to the opium trade.

the horrors of this war was deemed vital for the future of society. Inscriptions such as 'Lest We Forget' or 'We Will Remember Them' demonstrate the continuing importance of holding on to these memories in order to learn from the experiences, which are never to be repeated again.

The Great War of 1914-1918 shook the world with unmatched numbers of dead, missing or wounded soldiers, leaving one in six British soldiers behind on the battlefields (Winter 2003). Lord Kitchener's New Army relied on millions of volunteers at first but the long battle of the Somme took 50,000 casualties on its first day alone and conscription was introduced in Britain in 1916 to fill the empty ranks (Bushaway 1993). Within a few years alone, the circumstances of the war and the new challenges faced by military authorities brought about drastic changes for society at large: conscription and total war affected all families in the country directly or indirectly. Only 31 parishes in the United Kingdom did not have to grieve any direct losses – they are known as the 'Thankful Villages' and stand in stark contrast to places where the male workforce was literally wiped out by the war. The 'Accrington Pals' is a well-known example of the latter. Within one day only, 584 of the 720 volunteers from Accrington and District were killed, wounded or reported missing (The Accrington Pals 2011). These incredible losses became even more apparent since, for the first time in British history, the fallen soldiers were identified, counted and buried in individual graves. Over the course of the First World War, official commemoration practices and the systematic identification, registration and burial of the dead started to become institutionalised.

As a consequence, the aftermath of the Great War was marked by an unparalleled 'memory boom' in Britain (Winter 2006; Bushaway 1993) and the commemoration practices established in this period have since served as a gold standard for war commemoration (King 1998). Today, Bushaway argues, war commemoration practices in Britain 'appear to have a timeless quality and are taken for granted' (1993: 137). These practices are traced back to a sequence of events, rituals and other manifestations, which gave rise to this new tradition. Alex King suggests that the 'commemoration of the First World War (...) set a model for the commemoration of most wars subsequently fought by Western nations, both in the patterns of actions prescribed and in the attitude expressed' (1998: 2). This cruel war did not just trigger a boom of memorialising practices, it also changed the way the 'ultimate sacrifice' came to be thought of and introduced an ambiguous discourse:

In the years following the war, in the face of the army of the dead, the effort to commemorate went beyond conventional shibboleths of patriotism. Yes, the millions

died for their country, but to say so was merely to begin not to conclude, the search for the 'meaning' of the unprecedented slaughter of the Great War. (Winter 1998: 2)

The Non-Repatriation Order and the institutionalisation of military death

Responsible for this change was the institutionalisation of dealing with the fallen. Until the First World War, it was impossible for state and army authorities to identify and account for every single victim. Wherever a soldier fell was where he was buried in a nameless, often unmarked, grave (Winter 2003). In 1915, the Non-Repatriation Order declared that the physical remains of the fallen were to be buried in specifically designated cemeteries at the different war fronts and to remain there. Two years later, the provisional Red Cross Unit responsible for this endeavour was reformed as the Imperial War Graves Commission, which still today (since 1960 under the name of Commonwealth War Graves Commission) maintains 23,000 cemeteries and memorials in 153 countries. Subsequently, thousands of individual graves were set up during the war, uniform in their appearance, most of them identifying the victims by their names and units. Through this measure of regulation and control, the now named and placed dead soldiers came to life again: embodied in seemingly never-ending rows of crosses, the extent of grief and past violence received a medium to express themselves visually, leaving a burn mark for years to come.

With this inscription of past events in the landscape of France and Belgium came the uncomfortable inevitability of historic realities: the idea of the ordinary foot soldier serving merely as cannon fodder started to disappear from the scene and was slowly replaced by an approach to commemoration that gave equal weight and significance to every casualty (King 2010). Partly responsible for this change is the high number of volunteers. Bushaway emphasises the idea that Britain's total military effort was the 'sum of the contributions of local communities' and thus, the 'fortunes of the military effort and the local communities' were closely linked (1993: 142). The introduction of conscription in 1916 further tightened the link between the military and civil society inasmuch as it created a mutual relationship of responsibility and accountability between the state and its citizens. Thomas Laqueur (1994) labels this a transformation towards a 'democracy of the dead'. The 'Army of the Dead' acted as a constant reminder of the responsibility to remember the sacrifice of those who gave their lives for the future of their country:

After the First World War, commemorative efforts aimed to offer a message that loss of life in the conflict had a meaning, that these sacrifices were redemptive, that they

prepared the ground for a better world, one in which such staggering loss of life would not recur. Two decades later these hopes were dashed. (Winter 2006: 32)

With the onset of the Second World War, the cruelties of the past seemed to be rather insignificant in comparison to new weapons of mass destruction and the Holocaust. Jay Winter (2006) argues that the idealism of war commemoration practices during and after the Great War was not reproduced in the same way after 1945. Any hopes that people would learn from past mistakes were destroyed and an awkward silence seemed to be cast over war memory: ‘the onward march of progress is a thing of the past’ (Winter 2006: 19). Moving away from the state-led nationalist ideologies of the first half of the century, the new trend of war commemoration practices had become problematic, ambiguous and in many ways very different from pre-Holocaust times. From the 1960s onwards in Britain and many other countries, a shift occurred in how the past was to be remembered and dealt with (cf. Olick 2007; Winter 2006). With racial issues in the United States, the Vietnam War, student movements all around the world and the Eichmann trial, people started to confront their past differently. Romantic views evaporated and, in particular, the question of guilt, responsibility and accountability was revisited. This time, war commemoration had a bitter taste to it. Jeffrey Olick (2007) frames this in his concept of ‘politics of regret’, which identifies a change in tone towards apologies, justice, acknowledgement of mistakes and collective justice. By the 1970s and 1980s, the establishment of the International Criminal Court, the increased focus on human rights and truth and reconciliation commissions, together with a trend towards international interventionism, can be put in line with Olick’s argument.¹

The genesis and institutionalisation of remembrance practices after the First World War is a direct reaction to the unprecedented challenges this war presented. In many ways, these practices helped the state, the military and society to come to terms with the deaths of their soldiers and to regulate it through newly introduced rituals – practices and traditions which have survived until the present day. Today, however, military death has changed. We have come a long way from the millions of fallen soldiers of the two world wars, whose names are engraved on local community memorials and individual tombstones in overseas war cemeteries. The death toll taken by recent conflicts in which British forces were involved is not just considerably lower, but soldiers are not conscripts or volunteers anymore, they are professionals. The wars of today are fought on

¹ This review does not take account of more recent involvement of the British armed forces in international conflicts, such as the Falklands War, the post-Yugoslavian wars, the first Gulf War, or others. This is mainly because the literature available does not suggest that they entailed changes in war commemoration practices.

different continents a far way from home and often for controversial reasons, which, for many, don't seem to concern them personally (cf. Walklate *et al.* 2011).

Mediating sacrifice

The twenty-first century 'wars on terrorism' present new challenges to the techniques of warfare, their perception, justification and mediation through the mass media. A heightened proximity to and visibility of the consequences of modern day warfare has started with the first identifications of individual fallen soldiers during the First World War but it has now reached an unprecedented level. Today, the grief of the families and friends of the soldiers who fell in Afghanistan or Iraq is screened into the nation's living rooms. And even though the death toll comes by no means close to the wars of the last century, we are even more so emphatically pulled into the stories of private grief broadcast to the public. In the past century, communication technologies and the media have extended their cultural, social and political powers in unprecedented dimensions. Information in text or pictures is readily disseminated and available everywhere we go, covering virtually every aspect of social life. These developments have had considerable effects on the perception of war.

Contemporary warfare stands in high contrast to its equivalent from only a century ago. Death in the military has radically changed not only in numbers but also in the way it has been made accessible to public – and, I think, probably unconsciously and to a degree inconveniently so. The Non-Repatriation Act of 1915, which declared that British soldiers should be buried where they fell and not be repatriated (because at the time it was simply impossible) was revoked in 2001. According to King (2010) this has made it possible that soldiers are increasingly portrayed and perceived as individuals rather than anonymous members of mass army operations. Whether in media reports about casualties or in personalised obituaries (e.g. on the website of the MoD), a considerable effort is made to identify the actual people behind the names of dead soldiers. This means that – perhaps transgressing ultimate boundaries between the private and the public – today we can follow the repatriations from our sofas and watch relatives and friends say their last good-byes. The dead are no longer unknown, nameless or even faceless for the public. Symbolically, this process of personalisation rids the soldier of the uniform to discover and identify a unique individual – a man or woman, a spouse, a parent, a child, friend, a football fan or a keen rugby player. To be able to name the dead and place them (for everyone to witness and virtually partake) within a network of social relations has a strong impact on how we mark their deaths. Personal biographies are drawn into the public sphere and turned into collective memory

in twenty-first century commemorative rituals. The uniformed soldiers become personalised, the grief of family and friends emphatically accessible and the flag-draped coffins turn into symbols of collective, shared memories. But above all, today's 'army of the dead' does not just exist as a long list of names engraved in memorials; their coffins pass in front of our eyes, through the midst of our communities, our hometowns in bright daylight to remind us of a war going on.

New information and communication technologies in the twenty-first century are taken to have created the effect of a 'shrinking world', a 'micro information cosmos' that can bring people virtually closer to each other (cf. Sassen 1998). These developments now offer a large platform of discussion, e.g. on the political and moral grounds of international involvement in conflicts. More importantly, however, the personalisation of commemoration today creates a political platform that bypasses formal authority over national memory practices and has inspired new community-led forms of memorialisation. Compared to traditional forms of commemorative practices, which appeared mainly after the Great War, the Wootton Bassett repatriation ritual was neither state-sponsored nor a solely local event. Rather, it was inscribed in a highly contested public space, open for interpretation by local groups, residents, visitors, the media or the spectators behind the TV screens (and not to forget researchers).

It is important to remember that these technologies and changes are opening up possibilities for action but are not necessary causes of action. In the UK, from 2001 till April 2007, the deaths of the repatriated soldiers were not marked by any public gathering, yet the information was available and the hearses drove from Brize Norton to Oxford. Public perception of events can vary greatly and often depend on a number of contingencies to act together and make a specific act more important. Britain is not alone in having faced changes in how military death is perceived and treated by the public since the beginning of the conflict in Afghanistan. Only recently, i.e. in June 2012, the French government paid tribute in a public ceremony to four soldiers that died in action. The wars of this century have posed new challenges for the relationship between citizens, state and the military, and one additional factor has certainly proven to be key in initiating change: the media. Many phenomena, however, have been introduced, hyped and then been forgotten about through the ephemeral character of 'news'.

Structural changes and challenges

The Wootton Bassett repatriation ritual is unprecedented in character: it marked the first systematic repatriation of fallen British soldiers, the first community-led commemorative initiative in the era of ‘New Wars’, and emerged accidentally. The repatriation ritual that appeared in Wootton Bassett in 2007 does in some respects – not least in that the public salute to the non-local fallen; these dead are, in important respects, strangers – represent a new departure in the development of war commemoration practices in Britain. Earlier, I discussed how the First World War confronted society with unprecedented challenges: its extreme death toll; the introduction of systematic identification, reporting and burial of casualties; the growing role of newspapers and radios in spreading the news into individual households; the ‘Pal’s Army’; conscription; and not to forget the economic depression that followed in the 1920s. Similarly incisive changes have transformed war commemoration practices post-World War II. Thus, I argue that in the repatriation ritual of Wootton Bassett, larger structural developments were mirrored, which expressed a need to adapt practices to mark death in service to the challenges of the twenty-first century. It is the aim of this research project to examine such challenges and understand how these macro-scale changes are connected to the emergence of micro-practices, i.e. the repatriation ritual. And vice versa, how ‘the local’ reversely impacted on ‘the national’.

This official inscription of the events into a history of war commemoration in the first place is interesting and noteworthy, since it creates a narrative link to the past. The way the Wootton Bassett repatriations have been memorialised through rituals and stories offers us insight in the complex social processes through which human actors articulate their actions and beliefs and react to new and unexpected situations. As Malesevic argues, it is in this way that ‘ideological narratives impose structure and provide coherence to what otherwise would be incoherent and utterly contingent images, events and acts.’ (2011: 283). Above, I have outlined structural changes that have continually challenged existing narratives and practices about war, the nation and sacrifice. One such challenge or contingency certainly was the first flag-draped coffin to be driven through Wootton Bassett.

States, soldiers and citizens

It has been argued in the past that the development of modern warfare and the evolution of today’s armed forces are closely linked to modern state-building projects. More importantly (as many before have demonstrated in great detail, e.g. Malesevic 2010; Giddens 1985; Gellner 1983; Tilly 1975), the institutional transformations of the military, civil society and the state have

mutually influenced each other and ultimately contributed to the formation of the modern nation-state as a distinct institutional and territorial authority. The rise of modern nation-states in Western Europe introduced nationalist ideologies and with them the idea that a soldier's death in service is 'the ultimate sacrifice' for the nation. What will crystallise from the literature examined below is that the institutionalisation of the armed forces created a conceptual distinction between civilians and soldiers. The service of an individual in the forces thus put this person's actions, successes or sufferings in uniform under the mandate of the greater good for the country.

A sociology of war and the military

In *The Sociology of War and Violence*, Malesevic (2010: 111) argues that the gradual institutionalisation of the military in Western Europe gave rise to the modern bureaucratic nation-state. This is based on the assumption that the confrontation of political authorities with the challenges of innovative forms of warfare and threats to their power has resulted in a reactionary step-by-step adaptation and optimisation of their respective military organisations. In his comparative historical analysis of Western European warfare, Malesevic traces and explores the lines of reciprocal influence and interdependence between state and military. This approach provides a useful basis for understanding the origins of modern war commemoration and places a new focus on the sociology of war and the military. It further emphasises that nationalism is closely intertwined with the mutual relationships between civil society, the military and state authorities. In the same fashion, Giddens (1985) notes that whereas literature on the development of 'new' nation-states in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and above all Latin America persistently highlights the influence of the military, the impact of war on the internal constitution of Western nation-states has been systematically neglected. He argues:

The military involvements of states also strongly influenced the development of citizenship rights and their connections to other features of societal organisation, in ways that can be fairly readily traced out, even if they are missing from most sociological discussions of these phenomena. (Giddens 1985: 233).

One of the changes in military organisation was the introduction of mass conscription. Most Western European states, with the exception of Britain, had introduced conscription and military service as a civic duty by the late nineteenth century (Malesevic 2010). In France after the Revolution, for example, the decree of the *levée en masse* in 1793 put all fit males at the disposal of the state. The result was a 'democratising effect' on the military in which the number of noblemen amongst officers decreased from 90% to 3% and allowed for upward social mobility

(Lynn 1990). From the 1870s onwards, the use of small, long service professional armies was over in most European countries and they had been replaced with conscript armies, governed by expert staff, being fully bureaucratised. While states were growing institutionally, organisationally and infrastructurally in the nineteenth century, the relationship between the government, civilians and soldiers transformed as well.

Military death

The sociological analysis of the tripartite interrelationship between the military, civil society and the state is a vital element in the understanding of rituals marking death in the military. Following the argument above, the rationalisation and institutionalisation of violence in the name of the state and its externalisation created an artificial distinction between civilians and soldiers, i.e. between individual citizens and uniformed parts of an entity. By doing so, the sacrifice, suffering and death of soldiers became disconnected with the everyday world and inscribed in a larger context: the nation, the political, cultural and social community. This social contract between the nation, the government and the forces, is based on the idea of a *mutual* duty of care termed the 'Military Covenant' in a government paper in 2000. It refers to the...

... mutual obligation ...//... between the nation, the Army and each individual soldier; an unbreakable common bond of identity, loyalty and responsibility which has sustained the Army and its soldiers throughout its history. ...//... Soldiers will be called upon to make personal sacrifices – including the ultimate sacrifice – in the service of the Nation. In putting the needs of the nation and the Army before their own, they forgo some of the rights enjoyed by those outside the Armed Forces. (MoD *The Military Covenant* 2000).

This publication by the MoD for the first time outlined in black and white those rights and duties that have already been part of military culture for centuries. It is in a similar vein, yet more critically, that political scientist Michael Freeden emphasises how the war dead occupy a particular place in all cultures:

They occupy it because of the difficulty in rationalising sacrifice and because the bereaved need a rationale that explains the deaths of their relatives, transforming them into heroes; and because a nation betrays the duty to protect all its members by sending some of them to their deaths, on what is sometimes merely a pretext that those who die are protecting the rest. (Freeden 2011: 2).

Thus, as much as the death of a civilian is a private affair, the death of a member of the forces (above all when death occurs in operational theatre) is a public matter, if not even a state affair to some degree. Today, upon enlistment, death in service certainly is a possibility but will only occur to a marginal minority. This means that when it does happen, questions are being asked whether something went wrong. Did they have the appropriate gear, intelligence, training and

support for this operation? Could it have been prevented? This tension between professional risk on the one hand and the heroic discourse of sacrifice in the service of the country turns military death into a tricky legal area. The care that is shown by the state and charitable organisations such as the Royal British Legion to look after veterans and relatives of the deceased is exceptional. Nowadays, due to the low number of casualties, and facilitated by modern forensic and audiovisual technologies, the cause of death of a soldier is routinely examined in a precise legal process, which aims to establish the full circumstances under which this person died. Only when this process is finished can the bodies be released back into the care of their families; only then does the soldier become a civilian again.

Multiple deaths

These multiple identities that are mapped onto the bodies of an individual also appear to pass through their multiple respective ‘deaths’. In death rituals, we mark the passing of a member of a community: a family member, a colleague, a friend, or a soldier for example. It is not necessarily the case that the ‘deaths’ of many of these identities are paid special attention and often depends on the circumstances under which people lose their lives. During this research project, however, it appears to me that at least three different ‘deaths’ of a single person were ritualised: First, the military death of a **soldier**, which was ritualised within the confines of the world of military culture. The deceased’s name would be added to several memorials and rolls of honour, e.g. in Camp Bastion in Afghanistan and the National Memorial Arboretum. Medals might be awarded posthumously and the flag draped coffin was welcomed home with a particular military ritual in the confines of the airbase (please see Chapter 3 for a detailed account of the military repatriation). Second, the public death of the **citizen**, followed by, on the one hand, administrative routines and, on the other hand (in the case of the Wootton Bassett repatriations), with a ritual devised and executed by fellow members of a national community. Here, sanitary laws are followed, the coroner established the cause of death and the necessary paperwork is filled out to officially declare the person dead. And last, the private death of a **family member**, marked in a private funeral in a close circle of relatives and friends.

Even though death is at least by a common definition an event that only occurs once, I feel we have to make a distinction here in order to grasp the importance of the passing not just of one individual, but of one person who incorporated several social roles and inhabited several social worlds at a time. Death, if we come to think of it, is not something that happens, i.e. an event. It is something we do: it is a transition in the state of perceived being, which becomes real and is

made sense of through social practices. Therefore – and I follow in the footsteps of anthropologist Annemarie Mol’s argument here about the multiple realities of arteriosclerosis (cf. Mol 2002, also: Law and Mol 2002) – death (like the disease that Mol describes) can have multiple realities and is enacted in different social worlds at the same time but under different circumstances whilst taking on different meanings.

To think of death in terms of a collective performance within a particular frame of interaction allows me to analytically tie together a few things. For one, the repatriation ritual appears to be embedded in a particular context, which is temporal, spatial, political, cultural and social. Yet, it also recognises that the body’s journey does neither start nor stop in Wootton Bassett. Rather, the town is situated in a liminal transitional phase between the military and the civilian worlds, each of which have clearly established rituals and procedures to mark an individual’s death. The ritualisation process that took place in Wootton Bassett upon the first contact with the repatriation cortèges is a testimony to a strategy to make meaning of the unexpected, the new and the unordered. In the following, I will explore more closely how we can think of ritualised practices to mark military death and their role in constructing community.

Constructing community through memorialisation and ritual

Remembering past wars and commemorating soldiers and civilians who lost their lives appears to have become essential to modern societies. Starting in the late eighteenth century and culminating in the beginning of the twentieth century, the national identity formation projects observed in many European countries largely founded their grand narratives of the nation on the idea of a common past. Nowadays, these ‘ghostly *national* imaginings’ (Anderson 2006: 9) have left their imprints on our landscapes, calendars, social practices and politics. But what is it that makes death-related rituals and commemorative practices so important to communities?

In many aspects, the ability to keep memories of the good and the bad things in life plays a significant role in our lives. Part and parcel of the era of modernisation, with its secularisation and rationalisation of society (cf. Weber 1976), is the rise of a felt responsibility for our own destiny. As Fredrick Sontag argues ‘Doing away with God is partly premised on the assumption that man can not only account for evil but also control and even eradicate it on his own.’ (1981: 269). The perceived accountability and responsibility for our own behaviour can only make sense if we are able to learn from the past by remembering. This inscribes social action in a context of

historical linearity: the idea that actions in the past affect the present and, on the other hand, what we decide to do today has an impact on the future. In other words, historical consciousness makes us aware that knowledge of the past is elementary in our understanding of who we are today and who we want to be tomorrow. Commemoration practices, however, are more than mere occasions of remembering facts and figures. Dan Stone argues that they act as ‘social ‘glue’, bringing people together within a shared narrative of heroism, virtue or, in this case, trauma and mourning’ (2000: 55). According to Paul Connerton (1989), it is the performative aspect of commemoration that sustains social memory: a community reminds itself of its shared belonging or groupness by generating and repeating a narrative about the past.

In the literature discussed below, I will explore how memorialisation in narrative and practice constructs community by inscribing a group in its own historical course. In Wootton Bassett, during the repatriations, images of community, nation and a common past were regularly evoked in the symbolism and interaction during the ritual and around it. First, I will explore the link between memory and community and then go on to introduce ritual theory.

Collective memorialisation

Groups construct their image of the self by telling stories about their common shared past, present and future. As others have argued before: the past has yet to be born (Kontopodis 2009), organised (Law 1994), fabricated (Latour 2005), materialised (Haraway 1997) and stabilised in the future (Middleton and Brown 2005; Law 1992). Human memory is not precise or accurate in the way events of the past are represented. As social beings, our memories of events of the past are influenced by cultural interpretative frames and constituted by social contexts in the present (Samuel 1994; Fentress and Wickham 1992; Middleton and Edwards 1990; Kohli-Kunz 1973: 31–54). The assumption of a ‘collective memory’ – a community’s shared perception of the past – is important for the identity formation processes of groups (Halbwachs 1992). Social identities are constituted through narrativity, embedding the actor within relationships and stories that shift over time (Somers 1994). Creating an umbrella of solidarity (Cohen 1985), stories and symbols are at the basis of communities, which are ‘imagined’ (Anderson 2006) ‘but not imaginary’ (Jenkins 2004). Only through the process of memorialising practices, i.e. the creation, transmission and performance of common narratives and rituals, is it possible to declare and maintain the idea of sameness among members and difference to others. Theories of narrative construction of identity suggest, therefore, that a subjective sense of continuity can be created by

the integration of contingent elements of lived experience in the plot of a person's or a group's life story (Ezzy 1998; Ricoeur 1988; Mead [1929] 1970).

It would be limiting though to only focus on discourse or narratives whilst neglecting practice. Above all, identification is a process of interaction during which social and symbolic boundaries are contested, affirmed, formed and *performed* (Lamont and Molnar 2002). It gives meaning to individuals and groups by locating them within mutual relationships of similarity and difference (Jenkins 2008; Cohen, 1985). This research will focus both on the narratives and practices of local and national actors and how they have been contested and/or institutionalised over time.

These narratives are central to understanding the symbolism and significance of the repatriation ritual. On the one hand, they provide an insight into the common and shared beliefs of a group, or rather what people perceive them to be. More crucially, though, only the public performance of these beliefs in rituals can specify the relationship between people (Connerton 1989). In other words, the ritual surrounding the flag-shrouded coffins of the repatriated soldiers provides a unique opportunity to map collective narratives and imagery onto the individual. And this is how ritual and memorialisation create a sense of community among a group of individuals, whilst giving a group the opportunity to publicly perform their groupness and their shared beliefs.

The fuzzy thing called 'ritual'

The term 'ritual' is commonly used to describe an array of repeated complex social and symbolic practices. Whereas the exact definitions brought forward by different scholars may vary to some degree, there appears to be a more general agreement about key features of rituals. In the first place, the question is why there should be an analytical distinction between different registers of human action. What, for instance, differentiates a personal morning hygiene routine from a religious washing ritual? Or how does a sequence of initially improvised local acts turn into a meaningful ritual symbolising national unity? In fact, the lines between what one might call different 'registers' of social practice can be blurry – an issue discussed in depth by scholars of ritual theory. In Catherine Bell's seminal work *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* one does not even have to go beyond the foreword to be warned about the 'peculiar, unique, and difficult to define activities that are usually understood as *ritual*' (1997 [foreword added 2009]: vii). In *The Rites of Rulers*, Christel Lane (1981: 11) similarly starts her study of the role of ritual in industrial (Soviet) society by cautioning us to remember that clarifying the concept of ritual has been a bone of contention in the social sciences ever since its beginnings. This 'fuzzy zone that is called 'ritual''

(Handelman 1998: xi) has been examined, theorised and exemplified by authors from a range of academic disciplines and backgrounds already. In the following, I will outline an overview of existing approaches to ritual studies and examine their shortcomings and contributions. Whilst I will defend the use of the term 'ritual' as a descriptive category for the events observed in Wootton Bassett, the focus of my analysis is entirely on the processes through which practices become 'ritualised', i.e. how they are distinguished as types of practices that are special, transcend the mundane, encompass the individual and evoke communal experience. The literature presented here informs chapters 5 and following chapters in this thesis.

Ritual or routine?

Coming back to my earlier question, what is now the difference between routines, habits, rituals or even ceremonies? The literature that sets out to answer this question spans over more than a century, yet still, there is no clear answer. For Émile Durkheim, for example, ritual practice, in the first place, is more than simply a repetition of a number of activities, as one would have it in routines or habits. What he argued in *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (1982 [1895]) about social facts in general, is just as valid for rituals: the whole is greater than the mere sum of its parts. And I agree with him on this level for rituals are not just a matter of routines and habits or a repeated sequence of acts. Their very definition (as a social and analytical construct) sets them apart from everyday individual practices and inscribes the performance and experience thereof in a social and symbolic context. 'Social' because ritual practice always makes reference to community in the sense that it both indirectly and directly involves a group of people. In contrast to routine or habitual acts, ritual action is to be communal in character, not simply something individuals do for and by themselves for practical reasons. On the symbolic level, rituals are practices during which and through which actions and objects are endowed with meaning. Symbols act as multivocal placeholders (cf. Turner 1967) or 'vessels' through which common, shared ideas, values, norms and beliefs can be communicated and negotiated whilst remaining flexible enough to accommodate different individual experiences. For example, symbols such as the national flag are a 'social imaginary' (Taylor 2004) and they can mean different things to different people. Yet, this quality is a prerequisite for a group of individuals to be able to develop a sense of community: 'The abstract and arbitrary nature of symbols makes it possible for people to come together under the collective spell without having to explore their individual differences from each other.' (Jenkins 2007: 116).

Collective performance and experience in ritual

For many ritual theorists, the collective sensual, emotional and physical experience of ritual is central to the role it performs. According to Fernandez (1972 in Bell 1997: 73), ritual is a 'strategy for applying metaphors to people's sense of their situation in such a way as to move them emotionally and therein provoke religious experiences of empowerment, energy and euphoria'. It thus offers a unifying experience when common, shared emotions are evoked during ritual practice (cf. Sullivan 1986 or Schechner 1977).

The physical and emotional coming together in ritual performance, the sharing into an act of symbolic representation affords individuals to construct community not because they understand and believe the *same* thing but because 'their shared symbols allow them to *believe* that they do' (Jenkins, 2004: 112 – emphasis added). In scholarly literature, this point often was overlooked or (unconsciously) smoothed over in an attempt to construct a coherent narrative about ritual functionalism and efficacy. The idea that ritual is to be seen as a unified experience that creates community and cohesion is clearly on its way out and the focus in more recent literature has been on the complex realities of ritual performance, experience and narrative. Durkheim and his contemporaries are today highly criticised for exaggerating continuity and not recognising the roles of conflict, tensions and discontent in ritualisation (cf. Bell 1997). Gradually, ritual performance was described as a key for groups to solve or deal with contradictions in symbolic codes (Grimes 1976) or as a cathartic enactment of complex and ambiguous social relationships. (Gluckman 1963; 1962). Further, Crapanzano (1980) drew our attention to the 'ritual illusion', the common fallacy of understanding rituals by taking their labels literally. He argues that what rituals do in a social sense is much more complicated than what they are made out to be. But what is it then that rituals do?

The functions of ritual

On a very basic level, ritual functions as a mechanism that allows us 'to solve problems of adaptation that would otherwise be unyielding' (Bell 1997: 32). As such, thanks to ritualisation, there is no need to constantly re-improvise. For Clifford Geertz (1973), ritual performance allows actors to express and shape a symbolic system which fuses 'worldview' and 'ethos', the way things are and the way things are supposed to be. Ritual action should be seen as inherently ideological for expressing and (per)-forming values and beliefs collectively. Commemorative practices, for example, unite reflections about the past from a contemporary point of view and result in expressing ideas about what the future thus should look like. Therefore, collective

remembrance is in its core as much future-oriented as it is retrospective. It provides guidance for similar events in the future to avoid making the same mistakes again, and hence, ultimately offers a framework of reference for action instead of leaving individuals constantly having to re-improvise.

In addition to providing stability to people's lives by articulating shared values and meaning (Middleton and Edwards 1990; Durkheim [1912] 1995), rituals are also sites 'for strategies, conflicts and struggles of control' (Hockey 2001: 206). Collective acts of remembrance, e.g. political rituals such as national holidays, are taken to exercise cognitive control by providing an official version of a single collective narrative (Connerton 1989, Cohen 1975; Lukes 1975). Frequently, governments try hard to assert and retain power over collective memory by providing public scripts of interpretation (e.g. through national history curricula) or by paving public space with memorials of a common past (Macdonald 2008; Fentress and Wickham 1992). It is this perception of a shared history that enables groups to construct their image of the communal self and articulate it in social performance (Somers 1994; Halbwachs 1992). But whereas some authors (cf. Durkheim [1912] 1995) place the emphasis on how collective ritual practices are a means of confirming already existing social order, Handelman (1998) and others see rituals as motors of change that order things that had not been ordered previously and focus on ritual's role in social change rather than the maintenance of the *status quo*. Victor Turner's work (1967), for example, introduced the description of ritual as 'social drama' that works and re-works social structure in an ongoing process, going through stages of breaches in normality, crisis, redressive action and reintegration. Here, we move from a theoretical interest of what ritual means to what it does – from a more structural functionalist perspective to a focus on the performance itself. Ritual was increasingly seen as productive rather than simply expressive, with a growing interest in embodiment and an attention to new, often secular, forms of ritual or ritual-like activities (cf. Grimes 2002, 1992; Lane 1981).

Making ritual: Improvisation, invention...

But where do rituals originate? How does it all start? Bell (1997: 240-241) observed a ritual surge in the latter half of the twentieth century which she described as a 'new paradigm of ritual'. Both within the academic world but above all in psychotherapeutic practices and in the form of a self-help boom, ritual was fashionable once again and developed into a powerful tool for healing as well as a solution to address trauma, grief and individual issues. This 'ritual boom' that Bell described moved an important topic into the foreground of discussion: ritual invention and

improvisation. Bell (1997) herself seems to dismiss this ‘paradigmatic shift’ as something negative and ritual improvisation in this manner as a short-lived fad that applies strategies of ritualisation ‘to define community and society in terms of the self rather than the self in terms of the community’ (1997: 241). The underlying assumption remains that ‘real ritual’ is supposed to be communal rather than self-interested. But above all, she argues that the difference between ‘invented’ rituals and ‘traditional’ rituals is that ‘new’ rites do not usually derive their legitimation from a shared sense of tradition and established authorities. Their efficacy is measured in the way they are successful with the crowds, i.e. in how they manage to move people emotionally (Bell 1997). One of the examples that comes to mind is the extensive public mourning after the death of the Princess of Wales in 1997 – a sudden public outpouring of grief often referred to as the ‘Diana effect’ (cf. Woodthorpe 2010).

On the one hand, I do agree with Bell (1992: 8), Lane (1981) and others that making ritual is hard work indeed and whether it is effective or not depends on many factors (not least on how we define ritual efficacy in the first place). It appears redundant to me, however, to make an analytical distinction between new and traditional, invented or... (well what?), ‘hard’ ritual or ‘soft’ ritual, self-interested or collective, religious or secular, non-utilitarian or practical, etc. The importance here is that (and Bell would agree on this with me) ritual practice remains strategic since, during the process of making, consolidating and negotiating ritual, a differentiation takes places, which attributes meaning to a set of activities and distinguishes them from similar activities in a different context.

It is this process which for me is key to understanding the phenomenon I studied in Wootton Bassett. Not often do we get the chance to observe the birth of a new ritual, can we watch an improvised local effort by a handful of individuals turn into a nationwide recognised practice, and watch it being dismantled in front of our eyes. The ritualisation of the repatriations went on for over four years and, had the location not been moved, it would still be evolving alongside the geographical, social, political and cultural context in which the process was inscribed. A focus on ritualisation allows focusing more closely on actors and the role of contextual factors that influence a specific case in a specific situation. It is apt to deal with a discussion of change, tensions and adaptations but also continuities between this and other forms of cultural practices. Ritualised practices can teach us about the structural frameworks in which they take place but also how those structures – through these practices and permitting a degree of flexibility and creativity – become malleable. And with this development in ritual theory, we have come full

circle in describing ritual as something that expresses a status quo but then also remakes structure by formulating, creating and performing the collective (in both cohesion and conflict).

Conclusion of the literature review

This review was divided into three sections. The first part about war commemoration and the rise of certain remembrance practices in Britain sought to situate the repatriation rituals in its historical context and the associated literature. The history of war commemoration in Britain reminds us that, in many respects, the case of the ceremonial public gatherings on the High Street of Wootton Bassett is not an exceptional phenomenon. Honouring fallen soldiers of various past or present battlefields has emerged as a common practice in Britain. To take account of the history of commemoration of the war dead, I first examined this practice and the origins of typical forms of modern day war commemoration. Following the arguments of Giddens (1985), Malesevic (2010) and others, I suggested that contemporary forms of memorialisation in the UK are a result of the incisive transformations in warfare and the increasing bureaucratisation of the nation-state in the twentieth century.

Tracing these changes in both discourse and practice over the course of the past century, it becomes evident that the repatriation ritual of Wootton Bassett drew on an existing repertoire of ritualistic features, moral laws and protocols of memorialising sacrifice. This represents a vital foundation for this research: by basing the repatriations in their historical context, we can better understand how memorialising rituals and narratives are transformed over time. After this detailed examination of the history of war commemoration in Britain, the focus shifted to present-day influences on memorialisation. Since systematic repatriations of fallen soldiers have only been introduced in Britain with the involvement in the Afghanistan conflict in 2001, people in Britain have faced new challenges. These include the increased discursive proximity to, and mediated visibility of, armed conflicts and their casualties (cf. Walklate *et al.* 2011; King 2010).

The review therefore not only concentrated on what the repatriation ritual has in common with past practices of commemoration, but also investigated what is new about this recently emerged ritual. Then, I drew on a number of contemporary theories of structural mechanisms driving social change. To name only a few of these mechanisms, innovative developments in information and communication technologies have transformed the relationship between the media and civil society (Malesevic 2010). Furthermore, novel forms of warfare have emerged

(Kaldor 2006; Shaw 2005; Bauman 2001), national armies are increasingly involved in contested international conflicts (Walklate *et al.* 2011), and the stance towards national identification projects has changed (King 2010). Undoubtedly, broadcasting the images of deceased military personnel into people's living rooms has created a new platform for discussion offering a confrontational challenge to many preconceived ideas and concepts the public may hold about war, duty or sacrifice. The empirical phase of this study set out to investigate the role of these challenges in the emergence of the Wootton Bassett repatriations.

Subsequently, I reviewed the scholarly literature that deals in more detail with the complex relationship between a state, its soldiers and its citizens. I have found that military sociology and anthropology are still fields of research that lack the necessary attention. Unfortunately, themes such as death in service in today's armed forces are seldom picked up by scholars outside the remit of the political sciences or legal studies. It is important to extend the range of sociological research into the area of military culture and examine this triangular relationship between the state, the military and society with rigour. Some seeds for this future research shall be planted in this research.

Drawing this review to a close, the third and last part connected the themes of memorialisation of death, community and ritual. The ritual that developed gradually around the passage of the coffins through Wootton Bassett presented us with questions about how this small town came to show their respects in the thousands to those soldiers that they had never met. To be able to understand this, I revisited common ideas in ritual theory about the definition of ritual practice, questions about the functions and efficacy of rituals, the importance of collective performance and experience and most importantly ideas about how new rituals are constructed. There is much more to be said about the process of ritualisation in the following chapters but the foundations have been laid in this chapter.

Chapter 2 Methods

This research project started in March 2010, when my supervisor Richard Jenkins came to me with a newspaper clipping from *The Guardian* entitled ‘The town that weeps’ (25/02/2010). I had never heard of Wootton Bassett, nor – as someone who does not watch a lot of TV – ever seen any footage from a repatriation ritual. Initially, my thesis was supposed to study post-conflict reconciliation after the genocide in Guatemala but since there was no funding available, my supervisor and I had been searching for a new project closer to Sheffield that did not require large sums of research funds. Within one month, I hatched a plan for a doctoral research project about the sociological hows, the whys and the whats of the Wootton Bassett repatriations. Building on the theoretical foundations I had set out in my last research proposal about memory and identity in Guatemala, I had found a good starting point or rather a puzzle that both my supervisor and I found compelling and so I set out on this journey. Below, I would like to follow the process through which I chose to make sense of the phenomenon, explaining the reasoning behind the data gathering methods adopted in the research documented in this thesis. This chapter will trace how I first set out to situate the study within existing bodies of knowledge, but then allowed the empirical data that emerged to direct my sociological gaze in new and unexpected directions.

Approach and overview

Framing the field

Every research project starts by finding a working definition for what it is the study is looking at, what it may be a case *of*; in short, how it relates to other phenomena. This is a matter of finding and then refining the key words that will guide the research process, beginning with a review of relevant literature to finally situating the research in a specific field of knowledge. The media coverage about Wootton Bassett offered a readily accessible source of interpretations and themes associated with the phenomenon, some of which seemed to be sharp observations and others rather opportunistic news reporting. As shown in Chapter 1, I chose to first locate the repatriations within their socio-historical context. The history of war commemoration in Britain is one that I approached as a cultural outsider, having grown up in Germany, where the two World Wars are only ‘carefully’ remembered in low-key events. This meant that I had to familiarise myself not only with a completely new vocabulary but also with the traditional practices that Britons associate with war, memory and death. I was new to poppies, to war

memorials in every town, village and churchyard, to Remembrance Sunday and the silence, but also to funeral cortèges, to anything to do with military culture, to what the British Legion is and to what expressions like ‘The Great War’ or ‘Lest We Forget’ mean. Delving into the literature presented in the previous chapter allowed me to access knowledge that cultural natives regularly perceive as a taken-for-granted part of their cultural vocabulary or ‘toolbox’. More importantly, this allowed me to locate the Wootton Bassett repatriations very broadly within a field of comparative cultural practices that were used to remember the fallen of past wars.

What also emerged from this review was a disjuncture between the ‘great’ wars of the past century and the conflicts in which Britain was involved in the 21st century, namely Operations Telic and Herrick in Afghanistan and Iraq. Both in discourse and in practice, the Wootton Bassett repatriations appeared to borrow elements from established traditions in order to honour the fallen but, at the same time, they were utterly different; they were unique, surprising and unexpected. And this is the part that I was keen to explore, to understand and to write about.

Following a steep learning curve, I started by formulating my research questions in these early days very broadly as *guiding* questions, in order to leave space for further development:

- In the eyes of local people, visitors and national commentators, how does the repatriation ritual relate to other practices of war commemoration?
- What personal, local and national narratives do people draw upon to explain and contextualise the ceremony, and how are their stories challenged and reinforced by the narratives of others?

At first, these questions helped me to narrow down the many possible approaches and interests one could take (and which some did, as discussed in the previous chapter). Throughout the project, I followed two axes of interest: the first looking at the interplay of ritual practice and discourse, the second comparing and identifying the local and the national and the relationships between them. These two axes were the locations of tension, conflict and ambiguities; they constituted the ‘puzzle’ in this project and thus were at the root of all further questions. In order to learn about and understand these, I felt I had to start at the very beginning tracing the development of events from 2007-2011. Hence, I framed this project as a study about the genesis, institutionalisation and subsequent end and transfer of the Wootton Bassett repatriation ritual between 2007 and 2011.

Research design

This is a qualitative study about a unique situation that presented itself: a new phenomenon had appeared unexpectedly and in turn it had sparked a bushfire of reactions by the general public, from within the military and political establishment and in the media. Whereas quantitative research designs need to rely on a large amount of comparable and quantifiable data in order to check, prove or falsify hypotheses that have led the research process from the beginning, the problem here was that, to a large degree, this phenomenon was still so unknown and evolving that it seemed to offer more questions than it would present hypotheses. As Denzin and Lincoln (1998: 8) explain: ‘quantitative studies emphasise the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes.’ Qualitative research designs, however, offer different tools to examine processes and socially constructed meaning that emerge within practice and discourse and this was therefore the best way to proceed.

But there are other advantages to qualitative studies. According to Becker (1993), qualitative approaches have several virtues: in particular, researchers are able to better engage with the reality of particular situations in everyday life and then to adapt their approaches to those concrete research settings. There is much less pressure to derive abstractions and generalisations from the data collected during this process. Hence, although interpretive methods are often considered less reliable by quantitative researchers, they allow qualitative investigators to gain more in-depth understanding through detailed interviewing and observation (Denzin and Lincoln 1998: 10-11). The ‘rich’ descriptions found in in-depth ethnographies provide important additional information that enhances the validity of the verbal accounts given by participants. This is mainly due to the fact that a multitude of data collection and analysis methods are commonly combined under the umbrella term ‘qualitative inductive approach’. Qualitative inquiry therefore allows cross-checking between different kinds and fields of social interaction, by combining different methods, for example interviews with observations, and through adopting a longitudinal point of view.

It was this depth of analysis, and the cross-checking of different sources of information against each other, that allowed this project to identify, address and examine tensions, conflict and ambiguities between discourse and practices and between the national and the local. These initial dichotomies gradually dissolved upon closer examination, and I was able to analyse the data I was presented with and develop my own understanding of the processes at work as shown in the

subsequent chapters. Inductive approaches like the one I chose favour research designs that allow theory to emerge throughout the process of data collection and analysis rather than verifying or falsifying preconceived ideas or causal relations between variables. Hence, I felt that the data led me and not I the data.

Different traditions in social theory have formulated their own versions of qualitative inductive data gathering, based on the specific needs and objectives of the school of thought in question. Although my work has been influenced by many of them in different ways, I would like to single out some throughout this chapter and further on in this thesis. In the mid-twentieth century, anthropologists such as van Velsen, Max Gluckman and Victor Turner started to swim against the stream by redirecting the focus of their accounts away from the abstraction of models and systems to a recognition and appreciation of the importance of the ‘exceptions to the rules’. Van Velsen (1967) rejects the classical structuralist approach that seeks to find norms and rules in the observed in order to be able to present *systems* of kinship and meaning to the reader:

The structural frame of reference is still a prerequisite for anthropological analysis. But we now want something in addition: the statics of the structure ...//... should be supplemented and enlivened by an account of the actions – both ‘normal’ and ‘exceptional’ – of the individuals who operate the structure, i.e. the processes going on within the structure. (Van Velsen 1967: 140-141)

Suggesting his own interpretation of Max Gluckman’s ‘extended-case method’ (cf. Gluckman 1961), van Velsen’s ‘situational analysis’ was an approach intended to be able to look at how, within this ‘structure’, individuals were faced with a multitude of choices everyday, some of which could be anticipated but others of which were of a rather improvisational nature. It is this that brings movement into the rigid frameworks of structural analysis as we were used to from a more positivist leaning tradition. With this new interpretivist epistemological approach to understanding and analysing the social world came new methodological implications. Situational analysis demanded different ways of collecting data, of analysing the information and, most of all, that the reader of these ethnographies should be pulled into the stories themselves by taking on a more active role.

My own methodology has been influenced greatly by this interpretivist epistemology and action-centred methodological approach. Investigating the new and unique phenomenon that had started to evolve in Wootton Bassett, the focus needed to be on the processual and improvisational character of the change that was underway. Exceptions are just as interesting as rules in the ways that they are intricately linked, just as expectation is linked to improvisation. I

wanted to grasp not just the general patterns and official narratives, but also to follow individual actions and all those moments when discrepancies between norms and actual behaviour arose and had to be dealt with. What about variations, exceptions, deviations, inconsistencies or accidents? The story of the repatriations was full of those, in fact it all started as a result of contingency. But how does one go about grasping the untidy reality of social life?

Van Velsen suggests the following: first, the focus of fieldwork needs to be on recording individuals and their actions within their own specific environment (1967: 143-145). It is important not simply to draw abstract conclusions from the case observed, but also to situate it fully within a particular place, a particular time and within the complex network of relationships of the participants who inhabit this 'field'. Thus, participants are not just treated as ideal types of themselves or simply as informants, 'they are now actors in a series of different circumstances' (van Velsen 1967: 143) that are to be presented in the data as who they are (or at least as who they say they are, or appear to be to others). A detailed ethnography therefore requires the researcher to immerse him- or herself in a relatively small field with a manageable number of key actors over a long time. Taking practical limitations into account, this is what I aimed at when I took on this project.

In order to understand Wootton Bassett's repatriation rituals, I chose to study these interaction orders (to borrow one of Goffman's terms) in their temporal and local context and the particular network relationships they were situated in. Erving Goffman's earlier work (cf. Goffman 1959, 1967), like van Velsen's and other sociologists' who were influenced by social interactionism, focused on micro publics and small scenes of face-to-face interaction rather than choosing to study society or culture in a large scale. Yet, there has always remained a certain tension in social theoretical discussion between micro and macro approaches and many have aimed at trying to find a middle ground that combines the best of both worlds. In his later work, Goffman recognises this tension and warns his colleagues about the dangers of 'rampant situationalism' (1983: 4). To avoid this, social action should not only be situated in its context. Even if interaction is often of an ad-hoc constructive and improvisational nature that comes about in a specific situation, this does not mean that it is enacted in a space void of any history or pre-existing context. Most importantly then, being 'situated' means that a situation (and the social action playing out within it) evolves within already existing interaction orders, cultures and understandings: 'The regulations and expectations that apply to a particular situation are hardly

likely to be generated at the moment there.’ (Goffman 1983: 4). In fact, similar understandings apply to a whole class of settings.

According to Fine (2010), not enough explicit emphasis has been put on these aspects of a situational analysis. Above all studies dealing with emerging rituals and interaction orders would benefit from taking such a focus. Fine’s project is to find a theoretical middle ground in a sociology of the local that looks at opportunity structures and follows small groups in their specific contexts. Distancing himself from an overly situationalist tradition of interaction theory for its lack of recognising the importance of history and collective understanding, he suggests studying the processes by which interaction orders (or cultures, or rituals) are constructed *within* (1) a background of a common past and shared imagined futures, and (2) through social action that plays out in a particular space that affords certain uses whilst restricting others, whilst (3) generating and building on social relations through patterns of emotional energy (Fine 2010: 357). Fine’s attempt to link up the experiences and understandings that tie together different small groups and ‘provide the basis for cultural extension’ (2010: 355) is where he sees a possibility to resolve the tension between sociologies that tend to describe situations more as scripted or as improvised. ‘These tiny publics are knit together to form institutions, communities, and ultimately societies, that, although grounded in ongoing interaction scenes, are larger, more established, and more stable’ (Fine 2010: 371) and therefore, ‘watching groups we may see society’ (p. 372).

In Wootton Bassett, for a period of 4.5 years, a window of opportunity was cast wide open. Unexpectedly, a ritual gradually evolved from this, making reference to existing traditions whilst creating new ones in the very specific context of this small market town. Inspired by the above discussion of methodological considerations, this study aims to reflect not only the local realities specific to this case but also sets out to gain a more general contemporary understanding of ritualisation and institutionalisation. If successful, what happened in Wootton Bassett may allow a glimpse of society.

Data collection

This is an in-depth ethnographic field study of a small town following the theoretical approach laid out above. Throughout the following chapters, I will introduce the *dramatis personae* (in Chapter 4 and subsequently) and set the scene with respect to the background of this town’s specific history and character (Chapter 3). Over one and a half years, I spent longer and shorter

periods of time in the town, taking part in and observing not just repatriations but other civic events as well. When I was not physically present, modern technology allowed me to stay on track with local developments and to catch up with my participants on a regular basis. Following van Velsen's suggestion (1967: 143-147) I was able to closely observe a key group of individuals, interview them and get a grasp of the networks of relationships over time. My own observations and the interviews were also supplemented with a wide array of data from other sources, recording 'as much as possible of the total context of the cases' (van Velsen 1967: 147). The selection of data sources was at times led by theoretical implications according to emergent properties of data, but it was also opportunistic: it had to be, since new directions and sources came up as the research process progressed.

Opportunism is often treated as a bad word in social research because it smells strongly of a lack of systematic approach to data collection. And without system, there's no science, no validity and no reliability. The problem is, however, that the further we step away from undergraduate textbooks and immerse ourselves into researching complex social processes, we find ourselves trying to take a freeze frame picture of something in mid-movement. From the beginning of this project in 2010, I was very much aware of the developing character of what was unfolding in front of my eyes and the simple fact that this complexity and change was part of it, too. Things would not stop developing only because I had formulated a systematic list of data sources and collection methods up in my small office in Sheffield. Rather, I had the unique chance to take advantage of what was going on, responsive to events and the opportunities and limitations that came with them.

Contingency – a guiding theme in this thesis, which will reoccur in different places – meant that there was indeed a large amount of unpredictability inherent in this project. Practically speaking, there is only so much system that could be introduced since ethnographers remain both guest and prisoner of other people. Seeing this as a limitation, however, would be ignoring the wealth of data that can be found by adopting a more responsive approach to the field (i.e. the good kind of opportunism). What I studied in Wootton Bassett was a process *in the making* and people were making things up as they went along, because they often felt they *had* to, because they were presented with unexpected and unprecedented events. As events were unfolding, I was allowed to experience this process, being invited in by my gatekeeper and his contacts. It allowed me to observe, see and be made a part of the dialectics between public discourse and actual practice.

Ethnography: August 2010 – October 2011

After I had decided to take on this project, by May 2010, it became clear very quickly that the fieldwork had to start as soon as possible. Following a summer with unprecedented death tolls for the British Forces in Afghanistan, Wootton Bassett and the repatriations were now firmly on the agenda and had triggered a high-profile series of events. The words ‘Wootton Bassett’ were conjured up in the context of budget talks, and discussions about Islamophobia and racism, nationalism, Britishness, remembrance, past and present wars, controversies between political parties, the Iraq inquiry, and, above all, the upcoming general election. There was no time to waste. By July 2010, the University had granted me ethical approval for ethnographic research and I was set to start contacting people. Without much difficulty, I was able to set up an initial meeting with the mayor of the town and had also got in touch with the local British Legion chapter. In August 2010, I first visited Wootton Bassett to conduct a scoping pilot study to test the waters. During my stay, I witnessed my first repatriation ceremony and interviewed the then-mayor and two councillors, who then introduced me to more people within their local networks. Entering the field was facilitated immensely through these initial contacts that I had made on my first visit.

Overall, between the start of the fieldwork phase in August 2010 and its end in October 2011, I observed six repatriations, six related public events, had six longer stays in the town, collected vox pops during public events and interviewed ten people (I interviewed two others later). I took seven hundred photographs documenting these visits and I got permission to scan and archive one thousand pages worth of postcards, letters and emails that had been sent to the town council. A weekly online bulletin-style search (wikio) also kept me informed of any searchable material (news articles, blog entries, websites) on the Internet, which mentioned Wootton Bassett or the repatriations. I systematically searched the electronic archives of one local and several national newspapers. Casting the net as wide as possible, I also collected objects people gave me, news snippets, amateur videos, announcements of events, poems, community magazines, speech transcripts and other related material. Whereas this is only brief summary of the data that was made available to this study, I have chosen to include a coherent and detailed description of these sources in the annex to this thesis. Whenever relevant to methodological considerations, these sources will be discussed in the remaining part of this chapter.

From my first visit at the town council offices in Wootton Bassett onwards, I was given access to an abundance of different data, material and people. The amount of information available was so

huge that some of it has not made it into this thesis. At the same time, the lack of funding for this research project and the time constraints I had – both in terms of the end of events in Wootton Bassett and in my own life – meant that I could not engage in ethnography in the full traditional sense, where long amounts of time are usually spent in the field. To address this, a compromise was found in several shorter fieldwork stays, during which some of my contacts generously offered free accommodation and board for which I am immensely grateful.

Scoping the field

My first visit to Wootton Bassett was in August 2010, during which I established contact with the local chapter of the British Legion and the town council. The mayor and two long-serving councillors joined me for an interview just before I was able to observe my first repatriation on the High Street. This short initial trip allowed me to scope the field and gave me a much clearer idea of what I was dealing with, whether I would be able to approach people in the town to convince them to participate in my project and to let me observe and take part in the process. This is the crucial point in every research project where one finds out if the project can actually be realised.

The ethics approval gained for this project stated that there was no intention to approach close family members of the deceased for the study. On the one hand, this was an angle that I did not find theoretically interesting to pursue, and on the other hand I dismissed the idea on the grounds of not wanting to cause any more distress to people in a vulnerable emotional situation. For this project, the focus was to be on how the repatriation ritual developed locally and on the local groups of Wootton Bassett actors involved in it. An additional reason for excluding the soldiers' families and friends was that this group had not initially been part of the local ritual effort and were only integrated at a later stage. By chance, two years after the end of my fieldwork, I became friends with someone in Sheffield who happened to have attended the repatriation of his school friend and he volunteered to be interviewed by me. Other than that, I only contacted individuals or organisations that were directly linked with Wootton Bassett.

It appeared that gaining initial access to the town and to the key figures in the repatriations process would be mostly straightforward. Since the repatriations had already been receiving a lot of attention by the media and the general public, there were established routines within the town council offices, the local British Legion and RAF Lyneham, in respect of how to deal with enquiries. Each had appointed someone (sometimes called a 'repatriation officer') who was

responsible for the communication and liaison with the press. So before my first visit, I contacted these three main local organisations.

The RAF base was an immediate dead end: they informed me that ‘the MoD are unwilling to provide any information about the repatriations as they have refused other students and the media in the past and do feel that the details/information is very private’. I had also sent email to the local British Legion chapter and the town council introducing myself and my project and asking them whether I could get in touch or meet up in person for further information. Anne, the repatriation officer of the Wootton Bassett British Legion, emailed back immediately with a short message containing a leaflet with general information about the repatriations and what happened on the day. It answered a lot of practical questions for visitors and prepared them for the course of events on a repatriation day. But whereas she seemed to be open to share information, she was initially hesitant to meet for an interview. Her role within the British Legion was a voluntary one and I assumed that she received a lot of requests from the media for statements and interviews. At the Town Council offices, the administration assistant I was in touch with also sent me a very positive and open answer, offering some additional information material that I could view on my visit and set up a meeting with the mayor and two councillors. She proved to be a valuable contact in the future who always kept me in the loop for any relevant events. The staff at the Town Council offices also allowed me to use their meeting rooms for further interviews and we established a very good rapport.

When the time came for my first visit to the town, I stayed for three days and got the chance to familiarise myself with the layout and the atmosphere of the town, visit the landmarks that had been mentioned in news reports, and see for myself what a repatriation day was like. After the MOD had refused any information, I was relieved to learn that the staff of the town council offices, individual council members, and other local people who had become centrally involved in the repatriations were more than welcoming. Through the medium of my study, many, as they told me, felt they were given a voice and that a record of these special events was being kept for local history. Chris Wannell, the person who later became my primary gatekeeper and key to accessing the local community, participated in my first scoping interview, together with his wife and councillor Audrey and the then mayor Mary Champion. In the following fieldwork phase, I owed many contacts and introductions to them, as they welcomed me in their community and did their best to help me with my study. In their effort to preserve their local history through my

work, they unlocked barriers to a great deal of information, anecdotes and people in the process, but also invited me into their home and looked after my wellbeing.

Grateful for this support, I also became wary about the influence of these key individuals on my research, and about whether my view on events might have become biased by focusing on this easily accessible information. As debated earlier, an ethnographer is always both guest and prisoner of his or her research community. I would have been unwise to refuse the support I received from my gatekeepers, not least since I had no external scholarship funding for my study; I simply had to accept every opportunity as it came my way. In fact, and most usefully for the purposes of the research, Chris and other members of the town council were key actors in, and promoters of, many important aspects of the town's community life, including the erection of the War Memorial, which played a significant role in the events. What's more, as far as I am aware none of these key informants ever tried to obstruct any research avenue that I wished to explore; quite the reverse in fact.

In the spirit of van Velsen's situationalist approach I have included a detailed description of key actors and networks of relationships here and in the following chapters, with the help of which the reader can get a clear picture of the reliability of the information gathered. The close contact I had with these individuals, and the moral debts I have towards them, has undoubtedly shaped my work to a degree. I shall discuss this later in this chapter.

Negotiating access

Through this first scoping exercise, I gained access to the British Legion, to the administrative side of the Town Council, and several town councillors, I was introduced to other key figures on the repatriation day, and I was granted access to a large array of information¹. This information included a detailed account of the war memorial committee's records. Moreover, the town council staff showed me boxes and folders full with postcards, letters, email printouts and objects they had received from hundreds of individuals to thank them for their effort. I could not have expected this heap of information to exist or to be made available to me. It allowed me to examine public responses to the repatriation events in Wootton Bassett and opened several opportunities for textual analysis. In the following years, I worked together with another town councillor to archive the data electronically. I was also in touch with the Imperial War Museum about safeguarding the data for the future, albeit without much success. The town council itself

¹ A detailed list and description can be found in the annex.

would have liked to set up more sophisticated archives, but at the time was battling to finance safekeeping of the historical artefacts kept in the local museum in the old Town Hall building¹. This humid and small building from the 17th century only offered limited space to house the local collection, but from time to time a selection of the ‘fan mail’ was exhibited in the local library or in the windows of the town council offices for local residents to see.

After my first visit to Wootton Bassett, I was able to draft a provisional list with interviewees and plan further visits, in order to survey and archive the fan mail, observe more repatriations and other events, for instance Town Council meetings. To identify my participants I used a snowball sampling technique where my focus was guided by the theoretical development of the material presented to me or by the contacts I made along the way. I conducted interviews of around 45 to 90 minutes duration with twelve individuals, of whom nine were residents of Wootton Bassett and the other three, respectively, a filmmaker, the local Member of Parliament and a young man whose school friend had died in service and had been repatriated through Wootton Bassett. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, whereas one had to be repeated due to data loss.

Throughout all twelve interviews, I applied a narrative interview technique (cf. Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000; Schütze 1977) in order to allow the participants to tell *their* (side of the) story of the repatriations in Wootton Bassett. The focus was not to put words, interpretations or ideas in their mouths but to let them guide the interview and the story that evolved in the course of it. The specific expressions they chose to use or not use and the way they structured this story of the repatriations into a coherent narrative was of most interest to me. It was also very helpful to emphasise again in the interview that I was not a native English speaker and every now and then I prodded a participant to explain in more detail what a certain expression meant for them and what the cultural context of it was. Mainly, however, I was following and encouraging the participants’ narration with only a short list of probes and topics that I guided them towards in case they did not come up naturally. A second function of these formal interviews was that they allowed me to test some hypotheses and ideas and ask my participants to reflect on this or that interpretation of events. Unexpectedly, some of these formal interviews evolved into open-ended conversations, which were taken up again on other occasions and therefore continued for the length of the fieldwork. In this small town community, for instance on the High Street after

¹ A virtual tour of the Town Hall can be taken via Google Maps:
https://www.google.co.uk/maps/@51.541715,-1.904827,3a,75y,302.93h,69.13t/data=!3m5!1e1!3m3!1sbkurmcbwF_AAAAQW's8uuwA!2e0!3e2

a repatriation or on my way to the Town Council offices, I would regularly run into some of my interviewees who then struck up a conversation about recent news and the themes we had touched upon in our interview. Comments and addendums like these became frequent: 'I thought about what we talked about last time and then remembered that...' In addition to these formal interviews and follow-up conversations I also led many longer conversations with several other participants who I would have liked to interview formally as well but could not for one reason or another. All of these encounters and conversations have been documented in my field notes and thus explicitly or implicitly added to the information gathered during formal interviews.

Due to these frequent encounters with people in the public space and in order to facilitate further introductions, I set up a basic website (<http://lestweforget.group.shef.ac.uk/wp/>) that provided information to anyone who might be interested in participating in the study, or was simply looking up the project online. Apart from a project summary, I introduced myself on the homepage, offered visitors to comment on posts, and to approach me, or my supervisor, with any questions they might have. It also contained a section with links, photographs and blog entries. The site's URL was the first hit on the Google search engine and included in my email signature as well as my business cards. For me, this was important because I briefly met very many people on repatriation days and other occasions but did not always have enough time to talk to them in more detail or follow up conversations with them. The idea was that this website would offer participants the chance to check my credentials and find out more about my work and their role in it. Additionally, since I was, by profession, curious and nosy about what people did in Wootton Bassett, they could now in turn look me up online and find out who this young woman with the notepad and the camera was. To some extent, setting up this website allowed me to deal with the ethical issues that come with observing public events: it is not humanly possible to gain informed consent by all those who unknowingly become participants in a study (more detailed ethical considerations follow at the end of this chapter).

In retrospect, whereas I still think the intention to offer information to participants on a website was good, it turned out that my website was not visited very often or ever mentioned by any participants. Over time I learned that in the tightly-knit community of Wootton Bassett, word of mouth remained the most important medium of information. Social networks on and around repatriation days were mainly based on informal who-knows-who links between individuals; legitimacy came by proxy. If a key actor introduced me to someone, then my credibility and reputation were constructed through the image of me that my key contact painted for their

acquaintances. This internal community dynamic made my gatekeepers, and my positive relationship with them, even more crucial for the success of my fieldwork.

Gatekeeping and sponsorship

Whether access is denied or granted and what one gets access to is dependent on the contacts a fieldworker can make when entering the field and during the fieldwork. These initial contacts often shape a study and can transform research plans significantly. A well-known example in the social sciences is William F. Whyte's study 'Street Corner Society' (1981) and his accompanying field notes, in which he describes how he met 'Doc', a local man who was to be his gatekeeper and sponsor. Doc, for Whyte, was not just someone who offered to take him around and talk to him. He acted as a protector, interpreter, coached him how to behave, and also offered him his friendship. Here, Whyte (1981) recalls their first encounter:

[Whyte:] "I want to see all that I can. I want to get as complete a picture of the community as possible."

[Doc:] "Well, any nights you want to see anything, I'll take you around. I can take you to the joints – gambling joints. I can take you around to the street corners. Just remember you're my friend. That's all they need to know. I know these places, and if I tell them that you're my friend, nobody will bother you. You just tell me what you want to see, and we'll arrange it."

The proposal was so perfect that I was at a loss for a moment as to how to respond to it.

...//...

At last I was able to express my appreciation. "You know, the first steps of getting to know a community are the hardest. I could see things going with you that I wouldn't see for years otherwise."

"That's right. You tell me what you want to see, and we'll arrange it. When you want some information, I'll ask for it and you listen. When you want to find out their philosophy of life, I'll start an argument and get it for you. If there's something you want to get, I'll stage an act for you. Not a scrap, you know – but you just tell me what you want. I'll get it for you."

...//...

That was our beginning. At the time I found it hard to believe that I could move in as easily as Doc had said with his sponsorship. But that indeed was the way it turned out.

(1981: 291-293 [*sic*])

Whyte's reaction to Doc's generous proposal is understandable – he was offered more than he had perhaps dared to hope or ask for. Looking back at this seminal piece of ethnographic

research from the 1930s, today we can identify several issues of ethics, methods and integrity that arose in Whyte's account of Boston's North End. The quote above certainly made me wonder about Doc's motivation for participating and so freely offering insights into his own community, considering that he was about to introduce the researcher into circles of illegal gambling. Whyte also does not seem to feel too conscious about deceiving all his other participants, whom he identified by name in the book later on. These are all interesting topics that a researcher needs to explore within his or her own research setting. What makes people want to take part? What are their motivations to volunteer their time and information to this sociologist who came along and started asking questions? And most importantly: how do the possible answers to these questions influence (positively or negatively) the results of the research process?

In my study in the community of Wootton Bassett, Christopher Wannell was the one who took me under his wing to help me find participants and locate material. Originally, Chris was not from Wootton Bassett but moved there in 1967 after he got married to his wife Audrey who was a local. He worked full time for the fire brigade and joined the Town Council soon after his move from Chippenham. Believing strongly in the values of community, Chris has since been involved in many projects and committees. By the time I met them, Chris and Audrey were both retired and in their early seventies. They were obviously passionate about their voluntary work within the town and highly respected members of the local community. With the growing prominence of the town's repatriation rituals, Chris, Audrey and other members of the town council were regularly invited to events where organisations wanted to thank them for their effort. The increasing number of honours they received turned them into spokespeople and representatives for the town and the values they upheld so strongly and publicly.

Whenever I visited Wootton Bassett for any events, Chris and Audrey were both in the middle of the hustle and bustle, busy greeting friends and exchanging news of what was going on in town or being approached by townspeople about their personal grievances. Local 'politics' in Wootton Bassett was indeed a very informal affair. As described earlier, I met Chris and Audrey for the first time for my pilot study, when I had requested an interview with the mayor at the time, Mary Champion. Today, I can understand why the staff at the council offices and the mayor asked them to join us for the interview (much to my initial surprise). For them, Chris and Audrey had always been involved with the affairs of the community and knew all there was to know. More importantly, they were also both very keen to share this information and to speak

on behalf of their town. And lastly, since all town councillors volunteer in a small place like Wootton Bassett, as pensioners, the Wannells also had the time.

Since he became my sponsor and gatekeeper, Chris was my fixed point of contact and we met up whenever I came into town. Over a pint or a cup of tea, we would chat about the most recent events and the progress of my work. I could always ask him and Audrey for advice on different matters or check my facts with them. They have helped me with introductions and provided important background knowledge to past and present matters. But my friendship with them also helped me enter local circles, as people now started to trust me. The established relationship served as a 'certificate of respectability' (Barrett 1974:8 quoted in Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). This was not necessarily obvious because, over the years, many of the town's citizens, shop owners, members of the British Legion and officials had been prodded again and again for information by numerous journalists. For many, this had made them suspicious of the short-lived and superficial nature of the public's interest in their story and I could sense a feeling of exploitation as well. The media seemed to repeat the same headlines week after week, year after year, at opportune moments in the publishing cycle. Yet the town's reality was much more complex, moving and developing, and contained more of everyday life's banality than one would have guessed from the way it was portrayed. In fact, one of the first things someone said to me was 'Wootton Bassett is not a sad town even though many people think it might be.' Maybe somehow they trusted me to set things right and tell their story properly, as banal and yet extraordinary it was – what a daunting task! One day when I met Chris at his usual spot on the High Street during a civic event, he said he had wanted to talk to me about something important. Later, when we got a chance to sit down and chat, to my surprise he explained that he wanted me to write his memoirs, as he was 'not good with words'. Although immensely flattered and baffled by this genuine demonstration of trust, I had to gently decline since I had neither the time nor the skills to undertake such a task. Audrey and he also repeatedly insisted on wanting to attend my graduation ceremony like the proud godparents of my PhD thesis (which, to their credit, they are). These and other occasions showed me that, over time, the people I was in regular contact with in Wootton Bassett had not just started to trust me but also looked at me as an insider who was on their side.

Field relations

The intricacies of the relationships between researcher and participants in the field have been touched upon earlier in this chapter, when I exclaimed that ethnographers were always both

guest and prisoner of their field. But this complex topic needs further elaboration. As researchers, we naturally attempt to present ourselves in the best possible light to our participants, seeing that they are the ones that can control access over the information needed to fulfil our projects, write our theses and comply with the requirements and guidelines of funding bodies. In this we are behaving no differently to most people, most of the time, in everyday life. Fieldwork is, in fact, everyday life, for researcher and researched. Rubbing shoulders with participants during fieldwork, therefore, one is always influenced by careful face work and impression management, to borrow Goffman's terms (cf. Goffman 1967). It affects our talk, dress, demeanour and the way we interact with participants who often become confidantes or friends for the duration of the study.

Frequently, after the work has been done and the researcher moves on to another project that needs their full attention, their links with local people may disintegrate, risking a lingering aftertaste of deception. And so, here, we must ask ourselves how these ethical issues can be dealt with appropriately in a fieldwork situation, when 'you are likely to find yourself up to the waist in a morass of personal ties, intimated exchanges, and lofty and base sentiments as your own sense of decency, vanity, or outrage is tried.' (Daniels 1983: 213). What Daniels addresses here sounds more alarming than it probably should. She alludes to the multitude of different relationships a researcher may experience with participants together with the hard work that is linked to establishing, maintaining and negotiating these. In a way, as I have already suggested, this is no different to how we interact with the human world around us in everyday life. Yet, the difference between fieldwork and the rest of everyday life is that sociologists are required to create an interactional space in which – at least on paper – the researcher is supposed to keep his or her sociological hat on at all times. That this is simply impossible is one of the harder lessons to be learned, sooner or later, in the field. Or like Whyte already noted in the 1940s '[many] fail to note that the researcher, like his informants, is a social animal.' (1981: 279 [*sic*]).

When I embarked on my ethnographic fieldwork in Wootton Bassett, I worked hard on the image I wanted my participants to see: a young, competent sociologist. Over the course of the project, however, I took on different identities for people and morphed from one into another, sometimes from sentence to sentence, or day to day. And just as I was concerned about the way I was perceived by them, my participants were in constant negotiation with me too about who I was to perceive them to be. This dialectical dance of identification is nothing other than what we

experience in routine everyday life, yet we might be much less aware of it, or perhaps not as concerned about its outcomes. Or as Maykut and Morehouse (1994: 123) put it:

The qualitative researcher's perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others – to indwell – and at the same time to be aware of how one's own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand.

(Quoted in Corbin Dwyer and Buckle 2009: 55)

And it is a learning process, too. Daniels (1983) summarises her own experience in the field as an experiential analysis, a process of resocialisation, during which the researcher can enter a world unfamiliar to them and is required to learn things anew. In the process, the values and beliefs that the researcher as a private person may hold can be challenged and sometimes changed.

Researchers using participant observation can also experience different levels of membership immersion in the social world they are studying, which can be a consequence of epistemological or simply practical reasons (cf. Adler and Adler 1987).

As was the case for me, we are reluctant to enter some fields because we may hold negative stereotypes of our participants and the world they live in. In a professional manner, these are supposed to be put aside when we put our sociological hats on. Donning my own sociological hat, I entered a community that, in my eyes, glorified the deaths of people doing the job they had chosen in a questionable war. At first, my own political ideas and values undoubtedly clashed with those of the people I spoke to. Yet, and this consoled me in my work, this project was not about righting any wrongs or opening up political debate. I wanted to find out what made people tick and therefore simply had to keep my personal thoughts to myself.

Over time, however, my initial distance and reluctance turned into sympathy, as I learned to recognise more complex layers of behaviour and thinking in my participants. Soon enough the working relationship between my participants and me turned into a friendly and informal exchange of favours and kindnesses. Sometimes, gossip or personal information was used as bargaining chips to build trust. At times, free accommodation was traded for reminiscing about life in Berlin and jars of homemade lemon curd. Since the motives and roles were clear, there is not much to object about from an ethical point of view. However it is important to consider

what effect these relationships have on the material collected and analysed. Have these relationships been obstructive or facilitative?

The facilitative aspect of the relationship with my gatekeeper has already been documented above. It remains to consider in what ways it may have been obstructive, too. To start with, my close association with Chris and the Town Council may have opened some doors, at the cost of closing others. Realistically speaking, however, I will not ever know what might have been behind these doors nor am I ever likely to find out. The only concrete example for this is the British Legion's Riders Branch, a splinter group of the British Legion consisting mostly of ex-service personnel in their 40s who had bonded not just over their professional experience but also over their love for motorbikes and the associated culture. The bikers were not local *per se* but their group leader 'Big Steve' lived in Wiltshire and he and other members of the group had started to regularly attend the repatriations. At different occasions I had talked to Big Steve and other members, who were all open and readily agreed to be interviewed. In reality, however, I did not manage to get a formal interview with any of the bikers and eventually gave up. To decide whether this was simply bad luck with dates and planning, people being very busy or down to a certain reluctance to talk to me for other reasons had to remain guesswork.

The relationships I developed with my participants could also have been obstructive to my research in other ways. In the past, sociologists and anthropologists have often been criticised by their colleagues for presenting an unbalanced picture and whitewashed accounts that relied heavily on selective sympathies. In 1967, Howard Becker addressed this issue in a paper he entitled aptly 'Whose side are we on?' In it, he explains that 'The question is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitable will, but rather whose side we are on.' (1967: 239). Becker's question is a legitimate and important one and reminded me of a paper I prepared for publication in a working paper series of the French Ministry of Defence on death in the military¹. My reviewers took the view that my account of the events in Wootton Bassett sounded defensive of local actions and events over criticism from the outside. Was I not being critical enough in my writing and had indeed presented a skewed view of events? Could I even take a neutral point of view?

Becker (1967) makes it quite clear that he thinks neutrality is impossible to achieve and that the claim of presenting a neutral point of view is in fact veiling important background information.

¹ An overview can be found here: Eulriet, I. (2014), *Death in the Military in Sociological and Comparative Perspectives*, Fiche de l'IRSEM n° 34, Paris : Irsem, 20 pp.

This goes in line with van Velsen's (1967) ambition to strive for an explicitly depicted research context. They and others agree that any given in-depth ethnographic study will tell a story from a given vantage point, through the eyes of its participants, at a given time, place and context. What we as sociologists and anthropologists need to be careful about, however, is what we do with this information. It is our responsibility to show limitations by taking sides *explicitly* and as a consequence limiting our conclusions very carefully in order to recognise the hierarchy of credibility for what it is (Becker 1967: 247). In this methods chapter and the following ones, I intend to adhere by this guideline.

From the point of view of my research, I would have liked to interview more people and draw larger circles but the material I was able to collect within my temporal and financial confines has covered a wide array of social positions within the community and from outside. Moreover, it also seems to be in line with the findings of other researchers or journalists, which suggests that I have reached saturation and a good level of depth. I am far from suggesting, however, that one could not have found conflicting accounts as well, as this is the beauty of qualitative research. The claims of this study are limited to the stories and the material that people shared with me.

Considerations of ethics and integrity in this research

This last section to this chapter reflects on how this ethnography touched upon issues of ethics and integrity. Over the time of preparing, conducting and writing up, I was confronted with different questions in relation to consent, harm, privacy, exploitation and the consequences for future research. On a first glance, this ethnography about the repatriation rituals in Wootton Bassett does not represent an ethically challenging project and thus approval was gained easily by the University. For formal interviews and ad-hoc vox pops I gained informed written or recorded verbal consent. A large amount of ethnographic data, however, was generated observing large scale public events for which no direct consent could have been gained from all participants. In this case, I assumed that since this was a public event accessible to all that whoever took part in it was conscious of their presence in public and the chance that they were observed by others. There were no ethical concerns about this decision since no possible harm was to be expected and the public was in fact exposed to open observation by the media, too. At times, I was approached by curious bystanders who asked me whether I was a journalist and I always volunteered information about my identity, my study and my specific activities on that

day. As mentioned earlier, this was also a good chance to refer people to the website about my project and offer them my business card with contact details.

When it comes to questions about anonymity and the protection of confidentially exchanged information, I always made my participants aware that this was up to them. Due to the public nature of the events, none of my participants opted for anonymisation. In most cases, their identities could have been guessed anyway by the quality of information they shared with me. When I wrote up this thesis, however, I was careful about how I chose to identify individuals in different situations. Participants were only identified by name (in most cases only by their first name) when it was important for theoretical and narrative reasons or their names had already been publicly linked with certain activities during events. If this was not the case, I chose to keep to descriptors, e.g. 'a local resident', that provided all the identificatory information needed in that specific situation. This decision was made strategically in order to protect a group that was already under close observation from the media but also because there was no methodological reason that warranted more information. I had come to this conclusion after several conversations with my participants and my academic supervisors. Confidentiality was offered to all participants and only made use of in two situations, which have been fully respected. Any conflicts between individuals or groups have been only carefully discussed where relevant and were always part of public knowledge.

The only issue that was indeed more difficult to deal with and an integral part of this research was that of the constant reality and presence of death and grief. As explained above, within the scope of this research project, no direct contact was sought with the families, friends or colleagues of the deceased soldiers. At public events, I respected their grief and kept at a distance. The presence of these sad and distressing events, however, had a knock-on effect on many participants. On three occasions, anecdotes that participants told me during our interviews brought up emotions in them (and me) and I made sure to give my participant the space and time they needed to feel back in control of their feelings again before we continued recording.

This constant confrontation with the themes of death, loss and grief did affect me in this process as well. In order to observe a repatriation, I usually checked the announcements on the Town Council's website daily and then drove down the three-and-a-half hours between Sheffield and Wootton Bassett on the day and return in the evening. As a self-funded PhD student, I was earning a living as a teaching assistant and had been able to arrange my seminars in a way that

would leave Wednesdays and Thursdays free, as they were the most likely days for repatriations to occur.

The formulation 'repatriations occur' actually meant that due to unfortunate events, soldiers on active duty in Afghanistan or Iraq had died and were subsequently repatriated through RAF Lyneham and Wootton Bassett. Using this more neutral terminology had become a coping mechanism for myself to deal with the fact that my research was about the death of real people with real families. When I checked for new repatriation announcements every day, I was checking whether someone else had died. When I got the chance to observe another event where people lined the streets, then it was so because someone had lost their life. At some point, this aspect of the research project haunted me and I felt depressed that I was in a way 'waiting for someone new to die so that I could gather more data'. Invaluable conversations with colleagues and friends, however, assured me that since my work had no causal relation to the events that were unfolding, there was no reason to feel bad for the work I did. More importantly, I was not preying on the deceased and the bereft either – another concern of mine; if anything, my work would help tell the story of those people who wanted to make sure that these soldiers were paid respect to and honoured for their sacrifice.

Above, I have set out the reasoning behind the methods used to gather and analyse data for this research project. As set out in van Velsen's (1967) approach of situational analysis, to place this ethnography within its specific local historical context is the next important step in telling the story of the repatriation ritual in Wootton Bassett.

Chapter 3 A history of Wootton Bassett and the repatriations

It's a pleasant enough place, if unremarkable. Neither picturesque nor ugly, grand nor unassuming, a market town like hundreds of others nestling in the benign, ample lap of central England; solid, busy, buffeted by successive waves of prosperity and decline but enduring. Its high street is broad and long and crowded with pubs and cafes, kebab houses and charity shops. There are pet-grooming salons and electrical contractors, a medium-sized Sainsbury's, a choice of Chinese takeaways. Were it not for a bloody and dreadful clash of civilisations, an unholy war raging half a world away, few would have heard of it. These days, for better or worse, few have not.

Stuart Maconie (2011 p. 39)

The above scene is set in the small market town of Wootton Bassett, North Wiltshire, or as it has been known since October 2011, *Royal* Wootton Bassett. The events between April 2007 and August 2011 marked a new chapter in the history of British war commemoration. Henceforth, this small, and in Maconie's words 'unremarkable', place became synonymous with its townspeople's spontaneous gestures of respect for fallen British service personnel, during what came to be called the *repatriations*. In this chapter, I will explore the social, temporal and spatial contingencies that paved the way for the repatriation ceremonies to start at this time and place. After a short history of the town and its relation to the armed forces, I will discuss the role of the construction of the war memorial in 2004. This will then lead to an exploration of the town's layout and central spaces, and the reciprocal and mutually constitutive relationship between townspeople and their environment. In order to understand the mass commemoration ritual that the Wootton Bassett repatriations came to be, this chapter shall lay some important groundwork and explain how a number of serendipitous connections offered a fertile ground on which individual actions were able to grow into this novel commemorative ritual.

Local history

Starting as a settlement that was first mentioned in the late 7th century, the Royal Wootton Bassett of today can look back at a long history. In 1086, 'Wodeton' was listed in the Domesday Book, supposedly the oldest public record in England. Alan Bassett, who had inherited the manor of Wootton previously, obtained permission from Henry III in 1219 to hold a weekly market. The market and the charter granted to the town turned it into an important economic hub in the region (Gingell 1977). Over the centuries, however, the small town has not been able to successfully move beyond its role as a market town and its connection to farming and

agriculture (Crittall 1970). As the increasing industrialisation and specialisation of trades promoted development in other towns, and because no major industries or other significant population magnets could be attracted to it, Wootton Bassett remained stagnant throughout the 18th and 19th centuries and right up to the early 20th century. The population stayed at a steady 2,000 inhabitants for over 200 years (Gingell 1977: 150) and soon its formerly ‘small’ neighbour Swindon, eight miles to the North, started to overshadow the market town. Swindon profited from the era of industrialisation and capitalised on the arrival of the Great Western Railway Works, as can be seen in its growth from a mere 1,198 inhabitants in 1801 to over 200,000 in 2011 (Wiltshire Council - Census Information 2011). In the post-war era, Swindon witnessed a second economic boom, based on car manufacturing and the construction of the motorway M4, which connected it to London in the East and Bristol in the West. Today, Swindon is the infrastructural hub of the region, promoting economic development for neighbouring boroughs and providing employment and services for many Wootton Bassettters.

For Wootton Bassett itself, the twentieth century eventually brought about major change: its population more than tripled, and we can now talk of an old market town with almost 12,000 inhabitants, which presents itself as an economically diverse place that keeps on attracting people to the parish (Wiltshire Council - Census Information 2011). In 1908, Wiltshire United Dairy opened a site in town, which encouraged the local economy and turned into the biggest local employer for the first half of the twentieth century. With increasing access to cars and public transport, the face of the town slowly started to change: on the one hand, Wootton Bassett became a dormitory town, since it is situated well within commuting distance of London or Bristol; on the other, it also offers itself as an attractive retirement location, close to Marlborough, the Cotswolds or the Southwest coast but with lower property prices.

The town and the military

A major factor contributing to the growth of Wootton Bassett was the opening of an RAF base in Lyneham in 1940, only four miles south of the town (Crittall 1970). Until 2011, RAF Lyneham was the base for the C-130 Hercules transport fleet and other transport planes. At the time of this research, the airbase was scheduled to close due to major restructuring efforts. Local newspapers reported the MoD’s plans to transform the premises into an army training centre after its closure in 2012 (BBC News Wiltshire 18 July 2011). Locally, the presence of the airbase had had a major influence on the area and the people. Many civilians had found employment at

RAF Lyneham but the area also profited economically from the presence of over 2,000 service personnel and their families. The local economy benefitted from the presence of RAF staff who shopped locally, bought houses and joined social clubs; many pubs and take-aways thrived because of the needs of these airmen and –women; their children attended the local schools. A significant part of the community of Wootton Bassett was thus connected to the military forces in one way or another. In 1994, for instance, this close link to RAF Lyneham became evident when a Hercules plane with a local crew crashed in Scotland. After Wootton Bassett’s mayor had attended the memorial service for the crew in Scotland, the town council decided to bestow the high civic honour of ‘Freedom of the Town’ on RAF Lyneham and to establish an official friendship link, in order to give expression to the communities’ emotional bonds. Local historian Gingell summarised this close relationship, noting that ‘Wiltshire has always had a friendly feeling for the armed forces and Wootton Bassett shared that interest’ (1977: 135).

A proto-type repatriation

In February 2005, the conflict in Iraq suddenly hit home in North Wiltshire when a Hercules crew from RAF Lyneham was shot down, losing the entire crew. At that time, British soldiers who died in action were usually repatriated to the UK through RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire, just an hour north of Lyneham and Wootton Bassett. On this occasion, however, the station commander of RAF Lyneham insisted that his ten crewmembers be repatriated through their home base. The repatriation of the Hercules crew in 2005 was a proto-type event in Wootton Bassett for what was to become routine after April 2007, when RAF Brize Norton was under construction and the repatriation flights moved. Wootton Bassett’s mayor at the time Chris Wannell (2010) remembers:

We were informed by a BBC reporter of the repatriation during the morning of the 5th February 2005 and after a flurry of phone calls around the town to inform people, a large crowd gathered spreading out from the war memorial to line our High Street from top to bottom both sides to pay the town’s respects to those brave men who had laid down their lives for our freedom.

Town Clerk Johnathan Bourne explained these close bonds between the local community and the personnel at RAF Lyneham:

What happened that night was that the town that has had very long and very close associations with RAF Lyneham. It’s an airbase just down the road, it is noted as being a place where airmen go for a 2 to 3 year posting so people tend to buy houses in the area; their children come to the school in the area; they are valued members of the community; they are part of our clubs and groups and organisations; many of them retire in the area... So there has been this long association with the airbase.

So that evening, the town turned out to pay its respect to the ten airmen that had lost their lives. And I think that that, if you like, set a marker down. It was something about... the town turned out and paid its respect – there was nothing extraordinary about it at the time but that’s what the town did because it was an RAF Lyneham crew. ...//... That night they lined the street and certainly hundreds lined the street if not thousands.

The Hercules Farewell Flypast

On 1st July 2011, I experienced these emotional bonds during the Farewell Flypast of the Hercules fleet, which were to be moved to a different airbase. The characteristic Hercules planes had become a common sight in the skies over North Wiltshire over the past decades. The easily recognisable rumbling sound of the four propeller engines resonated inside people’s homes and the machines could often be heard approaching before they could be spotted in the sky. RAF Lyneham Station Commander, John Gladston announced this last flypast summarising his feelings in the official press release:

This is our last opportunity to say thank-you and pay tribute to the people of Wiltshire for all the support they have given to the Station over the past 70 years. It is with a heavy heart that I bid farewell to the Hercules Force, a sentiment which I know echo’s throughout the Wiltshire community. The Hercules Force will now take a piece of our unique and proud history to RAF Brize Norton where I know they will be most welcome and I am in no doubt that it will flourish and continue to build on our proud heritage for many years to come.
(28/06/2011 RAF Lyneham) [sic]

And indeed the farewell was a very emotional one for the people who had turned up in the centre of Wootton Bassett all along the High Street on that day. That Friday morning in early July, hundreds of people gathered in smart and summery dress for this special occasion. Moments before the planes were announced to appear, the masses started moving into the road excitedly, blocking the High Street off entirely. Nobody was prepared for this spontaneous action but the police reacted swiftly and stopped or re-routed the traffic during the flypast. When the planes approached, many pointed to the sky, clapping, cheering and waving to the four Hercules planes flying in formation. Seconds later, the airplanes had disappeared heading North towards Swindon. ‘An emotional moment’ commented the mayor Paul Heaphy later to me, ‘It was hard seeing grown men cry.’

These and other events I will focus on more below demonstrate these special emotional and historical bonds between townspeople and the armed forces. Apart from such public events during which these bonds are being created, performed and strengthened, there are also many more subtle commonplace practices, which can perpetuate or renegotiate place-identity in

everyday life. What struck me immediately when I visited Wootton Bassett for the first time in August 2010 were the many visible references to the forces throughout the town. For example, pubs displayed framed pictures of units stationed in RAF Lyneham or flew banners of units directly affiliated to them. Even displays in shop windows or shelves often had a military-historical theme (more so than I have seen it before in other places). Since the repatriation of eight soldiers in July 2009, the row about the planned protest march in January 2010 and a general spike in media attention to the town, the pre-existing link between Wootton Bassett and the military (above all the troops based in Lyneham) naturally appeared stronger and more visible than ever. These events are also explained and analysed in more detail in the following chapters when relevant.

The story of the war memorial

Even though Wootton Bassett has particularly close links to the military, one thing was peculiarly missing until 2004 – a war memorial. There had been several previous attempts to create a focal point for the commemoration of past wars. From the 1880s until 1939, a Crimean War gun decorated the space underneath the Town Hall on the main square, together with the stocks and an old fire engine. The gun seemed to be one of several precious municipal heirlooms, the equivalent of a family ornament, which someone might keep on a mantelpiece (or, in this case, in the heart of the town). Bringing memorabilia home from victorious battles was very much in fashion in the Victorian era (cf. Richards 1990). This stands in stark contrast to twentieth century war memorial culture. The horrors of the Great War of 1914-1918, initiated a new era of war memorialisation, differing to Victorian glorification and nostalgic reminiscence, as discussed elsewhere. The impact of the First World War on the country's population is generally taken to be unprecedented, and these emotional scars were made manifest in the construction boom of war memorials in most places shortly after the War's end (cf. Winter, 1998). Yet, Wootton Bassett was not one of those places. In fact, the opposite seems to have been the case, in that local veterans actively opposed an attempt to erect a memorial in 1920. The local historian P. J. Gingell (1977) records local man Arthur Coleman's anecdote about a scene that he witnessed that year:

The Town Trust had been given a World War I German gun and planned to make it a stable-mate for the Crimean gun already under the Hall, but a little group of ex-Service men strongly objected. For some weeks they managed to dissuade contractors from moving it up the hill from the station. However, it eventually appeared in the High St. only to find further progress barred by a human wall. A dangerous confrontation ensued. At the most critical moment Charlie Sheppard unstrapped his wooden leg and hung it

over the gap made in the railings to give passage to the gun, shouting ‘King Jarge did give I this ‘ere peg leg, and nobody baint goin’ to touch ‘ee.’ And nobody did. ...//... Suddenly there was a concerted rush, the gun was man-handled unto the roadway and manoeuvred wildly down the hill to end up in the brook near Hunts Mill, where it lay for several years. The culprits were never brought to account for a strange blindness had temporarily affected all bystanders.

(1977: 113–114)

Although this amusing anecdote certainly should be seen as a ‘party-piece’ – as Gingell points out himself (1977: 114) – with its historical facts possibly tweaked for the sake of comic quality – the story also teaches the reader something about Wootton Bassett, its tenacious townspeople and the power of collective action. There seems to be some truth to this story about the thwarted plan to add a German gun, and thus a reminder of the horrors of the War, to the rather pleasant display of ‘souvenirs’ under the Town Hall. It is debatable, yet interesting, to contemplate whether this incident might have been a decisive factor in the town not having a war memorial in the years following World War I. What is more certain, however, is the symbolic significance of the anecdote: the imagery of a wooden leg – this ultimate symbol of the maiming experience of war – barring access to a space of communal memory, invites the observer to empathise with the veterans, who seem to want to forget rather than remember. The object embodying these unwanted memories (the gun) therefore ends up being ‘forgotten about’ in the ditch.

How Wootton Bassett came to have a war memorial nevertheless is an interesting story, which, according to the Town Clerk Johnathan Bourne says a lot about the small market town:

Johnathan: Hm. I think that that is an interesting place to start. Because Wootton Bassett, for a town of this size, um... for it not to have a war memorial was quite interesting. It has got a memorial hall, money was raised and used for the purpose of a memorial hall. But it didn’t have a separate war memorial.

Aline: Are there names of fallen soldiers in the memorial hall?

Respondent: Yeah, the British Legion put some of those there. There is also a garden of remembrance at the cemetery which the British Legion created but no war memorial. And right up until, um... right the way through the 1900s, right the way to 1999, you know, no war memorial. There had been a number of attempts over the years to try and generate some interest in providing one. But actually, the further people got away from the Second World War, the less people felt that it was relevant. And then along comes Jay Cunningham, who is a young cadet, army cadet, teenager, and she says that’s not good enough. We need to have a war memorial. We need to be able to pay respects and do it properly. I am going to see this happen. Now... she didn’t do it on her own by any stretch of the imagination. People like Chris Wannell, Steve Bucknell got behind her. They formed a committee, she figure headed it and they were, if you like, the ‘political’

brains behind it [laughing] because you do need a bit of something to do it. And what captured peoples imagination, though, was not Steve Bucknell or Chris Wannell, it was Jay Cunningham, it was the fact that there was a young girl who was saying we should have a war memorial. And I think there's something in that and I think... once you start to put this together, something about the fact that that was only created because of a young person saying we need this to be... we need this to be here.

Almost eighty years after the episode with the stubborn veterans and the war gun, Wootton Bassett was finally to receive a war memorial, after a local teenager was able to secure widespread support for her petition for a war memorial in Wootton Bassett. A group of eleven local residents with high social and political standing within the community were keen on the idea and helped Jay form a committee in 1998. In the following six years, the group raised approximately £ 23,000 running marathons, doing parachute jumps, collecting a mile of pennies, holding tea and coffee mornings, and encouraging individuals, organisations and businesses to donate. By October 2004, Wootton Bassett finally unveiled the town's new war memorial. When the repatriation cortèges started to come through Wootton Bassett, this memorial became the focal point of the ritual that incrementally evolved. The fundraising and construction phase of the memorial gave this community the chance to engage actively with questions of remembrance and war commemoration unlike many other communities who have had their war memorials since the 1920s. And directly after the unveiling, the memorial in the centre of town became key to the first proto-typical repatriation in February 2005. Ever since, the story of the memorial has been closely intertwined with the story of the repatriations.

A community effort for a memorial

In 1998 it all started when the 15-year-old Army Cadet 'felt there was an inadequate focal point for Remembrance Day parades' (SA 02/01/2004; SA 21/03/2003, SA 30/05/2002). Her comment is said to have marked the beginning of the war memorial committee, of which Jay was both founder and chairwoman. In an interview with the local newspaper, Jay said she was 'surprised that there was no cenotaph to commemorate the 72 people who came from Wootton Bassett and gave their lives for us during both wars' (SA 19/02/2004). In a later article, the language changed from describing the temporary memorial as 'inadequate' to say that Jay was 'disgusted' by it (SA 29/07/2004) or even 'took offence at dipping the standard of the Army cadets' (Wannell 2010). Based on her young age and perceived exemplary role as teenager and Army Cadet, her actions were marketed repeatedly for the war memorial campaign both by the media and local key actors. For example, a resident's letter to the local newspaper not only pays

tribute to her dedication and perseverance but also emphasises that her actions ‘shine a light on the youth who are our future’ (SA 06/10/2004). The Town Clerk also emphasises this point in an interview with me:

But again if you step back from the detail and you think about the fact that a young girl leading the committee... It [incomprehensible] it does [incomprehensible] focus on it. This didn’t happen in a conventional way. This happened... you know, how many years after the war? I mean this is now 55 years after the war, before it started and it’s a young girl that’s saying ‘hey, come on!’ Now that’s unconventional, that’s something about this community, the fact that this community got behind her to do that, raise the money and make it happen. As the time went, you know, nobody has heard of Wootton Bassett before and so somebody comes up with the idea of having a war memorial in WB, what a [incomprehensible] idea was that? You know, why haven’t you done it in the last 55 years, seriously, I mean, people would say that. They wouldn’t say it now [laughing], not after what’s happened. It’s a young girl that was able to light the spark of imagination. And it was a young man that designed it as well.

After Jay’s appeal in 1998, the committee successfully gained widespread support for their cause among local citizens using their own contacts, networks and influence on decision-making processes in the town. Soon, a competition was held and the public decided on the memorial’s design. The idea for it was based on the proposal of another teenager and Army Cadet who won the public over with his idea for a sculpture of a hand holding a globe. Due to structural issues, it was later amended to be two sets of hands. The symbol of the earth cradled in a human hand was interpreted as symbolising historicity, community and sacrifice. Jay Cunningham, the committee chairwoman, was quoted in the *Swindon Advertiser* explaining that the design represents ‘both the past and the concept of looking forward to the future’ (SA 19/02/2004; 02/01/2004; 30/05/2002). The committee secretary, town councillor and mayor at the time, Susan Cooksley, put it in different words: ‘The future is in our own hands, but at the same time we should never forget the sacrifices made by these people in the past.’ (SA 28/09/2004; 29/07/2004). And a little later, Chris Wannell (committee member, town councillor and former mayor) said ‘... four hands supporting the World to signify that the young have the future of the world in their hands.’ (Wannell 2010 [sic]).

Both the public and local stakeholders had to be convinced by the proposed design before planning permission was granted for the project. Meanwhile, a scale model of the full memorial design was exhibited in the local Post Office (located on the High Street close to the old Town Hall) around Remembrance Day 2000 for public approval. Not everyone was happy with the choice of the globe. As a committee member, member of the British Legion and town councillor

motions: ‘We definitely need a memorial and I support it wholeheartedly. But personally I don’t think the hands and globe is the right design. I would prefer to see a sculpture of a plain poppy reef [*sic: wreath*], which is the ultimate symbol of remembrance.’ (SA 02/01/2004). Others welcomed the design and thought that: ‘It’s a great idea and it’s a good design because our troops have been all over the world, from Mesopotamia to South Africa in the Boer War’ (a member of the Swindon British Legion in SA 02/01/2004). Moreover, it was a vital part of the monument’s conception to mount the globe in such a way that the side showing the Falkland Islands would point south, towards RAF Lyneham. This gesture is meant to honour and emphasise the close relationship between the community and airbase personnel: ‘The globe shows every country that our troops have served [*sic: in*] and we made sure that the Falkland Isles were pointed towards RAF Lyneham to recognise the important role it played in the 1982 conflict and our town’s close links with the base’ (Wannell 2010). This explicit reference to the conflict over the Falkland Islands makes me wonder whether today the globe would have been set up with Afghanistan and Iraq pointing to Lyneham instead, a question that will have to remain unanswered.

Whose memorial?

During the six-year construction and fundraising process, many details were put up for discussion. The stone plinth, i.e. the base of the sculpture, was one of them. It had already been erected in 2001, as a first step towards the completion of the memorial. Since additional funds still had to be raised, the base did not yet bear any plaques or engravings but, according to a local paper, there was to be a hollow compartment, which would contain a scroll listing the names of those 72 soldiers who died in the two World Wars¹. A member of the Duke of Edinburgh’s Royal Regiment Association who had lost his 19-year-old son in Bosnia in the 1990s ‘would like to see Martin’s name included. Martin was killed in a road accident with two other servicemen.’ (SA 02/01/2004). He said: ‘It is a good idea to have a memorial but all local lads should be included’ (SA 19/02/2004). A local member of the British Legion thought ‘the monument should be a memorial to people who died in all conflicts, not just the two world wars’ (SA 19/02/2004). After fundraising had finally secured the monies needed to finish the memorial, the stone base was engraved on the south-facing side with the slogan ‘Lest We Forget’, whereas the three other sides bear the names of those fallen in the two World Wars. These lists of names were a point of great importance for the local branch of the Royal British Legion. They had just

¹ NB: It appears there is a compartment inside the plinth but it never contained a scroll with names. It was added to fit an electric box for illumination, another idea which was contested and finally dismissed.

given up their own Hall of Remembrance where they used to keep record of those who served and died. British Legion members were thus keen on transferring these names onto the new war memorial yet, as noted above, there was heated discussion over the details of who was to be remembered publicly and how. Finally, it was decided by the British Legion that only the names kept in the book of remembrance in the local church were to be included. The slogan for the stone base was under contention, too, and put a strain on the relationship between the war memorial committee and the British Legion, before a consensus could be found with 'Lest We Forget'. Options discussed included 'To the Glorious Dead' or the 'Millennium Memorial' but were dismissed, as they did not seem to grab the contemporary spirit of memorialisation.

The last hurdle the memorial committee had to overcome was the final transport of the heavy iron cast globe to its new place on the High Street and mounting it on the stone base. Committee members Chris Wannell and his wife Audrey remember some eight years later what efforts it took to finalise the project. The requirements for this were a street work licence with health and safety implications as well as a £ 5 million insurance cover. The committee did not give up and found a loophole in the regulations that allowed them to finish the memorial without needing a street work licence. As for the insurance cover, one insurance company finally agreed to cover them over a period of 24 hours. The committee members used vehicles and cranes borrowed from friends and family to pick up the heavy iron cast sculpture from nearby Calne and then put it up in the High Street. In September 2004, the memorial was assembled on a Saturday morning and prepared for its unveiling ceremony a few days later.

On 3 October 2004 then finally, the town gathered in the central square to watch its first war memorial being unveiled. The Union Flag that had shrouded the memorial was lifted during the official ceremony. Local citizens came to celebrate the inauguration and so did standard bearers from the Royal British Legion, town criers (both locally and from neighbouring parishes), troops from RAF Lyneham and the political elite from the area. Symbolising the community effort that had gone into it over six years, the flag was lifted from the memorial, held by the mayor, the local MP, and four other people who were heavily involved in its design, planning and construction. One aspect about this permanent memorial to the fallen, however, was to remain temporary: the small grass verge around the plinth stays until today just a temporary timber-framed construction, put together as a makeshift solution for one Remembrance Day. A permanent grass verge would require new planning permission as it could represent a trip hazard. Again here, the committee has successfully proven its endurance and persistence. The

‘temporary’ grass verge is now an important part of the memorial as it allows people to place wreaths, flowers, cards and memorabilia.

The importance of the memorial

For a town, which did not have a war memorial before, this new monument placed strategically in the heart of the town has managed to turn into an icon of this community. Not only was it the natural focal point for the repatriation ceremonies; reporter teams also frequently and readily used it as background for their broadcasts from Wootton Bassett. Today, the local council’s prospectus about the town dedicates as much space to the memorial as it does to its 17th century Town Hall and officially recognises it as one of the town’s main focal points. The story of how the town finally came to have a permanent memorial in the central square is important as it helps us understand Wootton Bassett’s history of war commemoration and its community networks. For many locals, the recent erection of the memorial has marked a starting point for memorialising the war dead and paying tribute to their close emotional bonds to the military. The war memorial has since offered a place for remembrance and a surface for reflection. Any subsequent events, like the February 2005 Hercules tragedy, annual Remembrance Day parades or the repatriations from 2007 onwards, have taken place at the new war memorial in the town square, which offered itself as the most obvious and natural place to commemorate and gather, due to its centrality, layout and symbolism. When more and more visitors came to the repatriation ceremonies, the war memorial and the Town Hall became icons of their ‘pilgrimage’. Figuring in the background of most images reporting from the repatriations in the media, the building and the monument started to visually and conceptually frame the repatriation ritual as points of reference.

In addition, most local accounts refer to the construction of the war memorial as a crucial triggering moment: residents have assured me repeatedly that had it not been for the memorial, the repatriation ceremonies would not have evolved in the same way. Why this is, however, nobody ever could explain in detail to me. In *History of Wootton Bassett’s Tribute To The Fallen* by Chris Wannell (2010), a one-page handout produced for different public events he attended as a speaker, for example, the author creates a narrative by connecting 1) the construction process of the memorial (1998-2004) with 2) the proto-typical repatriation ceremony for the Hercules crew in 2005 and finally 3) the changed repatriation route in 2007. Even though all three are enlisted in this supposedly coherent story, the one element that connects these three events with each

other and with the evolution of the ceremony is never made explicit and paragraphs are not logically connected.

The underlying connection only became clearer to me when I started considering the author's role in either of these events: he and a small group of other actors have repeatedly been put in connection with organising public events and raising the town's awareness of certain issues. Many of these key actors are (former or current) members of the town council, stood as mayors and inhabit(ed) other important roles within the town's professional, social, cultural or religious life. What I think connects these events in Chris' history of the repatriations is that the war memorial and the death of the Hercules crew have moved issues of war commemoration into the centre of public attention. Then, as the cortèges started to come through the High Street with an unexpected regularity post-April 2007, townspeople not only already had a perfect place to commemorate and pay their respects, but they had already enacted it and discussed it within the community. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the role of a few key actors like Chris to actively create and promote this momentum for action through their awareness-raising campaigns and social networking skills. Therefore, I believe that the construction of the war memorial fulfilled two main functions in how the town came to be the centre of the repatriations: mostly it provided people with a location and a code of remembrance; but it also marks six years during which the community worked together to honour those in their ranks who fell defending kin and country. Coincidentally, just after the war memorial was set up, Wootton Bassett witnessed its first repatriation in February 2005.

Siting the repatriations

In this research, spatial contingencies have turned out to play an important role during the events associated with the repatriations of British soldiers. Along the cortège's route from RAF Lyneham to the military hospital in Oxford, people regularly gathered to pay their respects in their particular ways, often not dissimilar to what was done in Wootton Bassett but clearly not to the same extent. What happened in Wootton Bassett was special and unprecedented in many ways. Yet, why did it happen here and not in any other place on the hearses' fifty odd-miles journey to Oxford?

Initially, no one planned the Wootton Bassett repatriation ceremonies or could have possibly envisaged them to become the new standard for twenty-first century British war

commemoration. On the contrary, it was emphasised repeatedly that the ceremonies grew *organically*, incorporating individuals' show of respect, groups' rituals and of course all those little coincidences, e.g. bell ringing practice or skip lorries – but I will come to those later. Let us also ignore for a moment the very mythical tint conferred to the 'story of the repatriations' by keeping the explanation vague, non-intentional and not clearly connected to human actors. Instead, let us have a closer look at what action possibilities Wootton Bassett's town centre offered in the first place, before we take into account what individual actors did to make sense of the situations they were confronted with. Hence, the subsequent paragraphs are designed to explain why the repatriation ceremonies *could* 'happen' in Wootton Bassett. They will explore the spatial, historical and social possibilities for action offered by the layout of the town centre and refer to the different ways these public spaces are used on normal days or special occasions. The argument I present here is that had it been a different kind of space, the repatriation ceremonies might have never happened as they did.

The market town Wootton Bassett has developed around the High Street, which is the main traffic axis leading through the centre of the town, connecting Calne, Lyneham, Wootton Bassett, the M4 and Swindon through the A 3102. It is approximately one kilometre long and unusually wide. Famously, the High Street used to be lined by hundreds of people paying respect to the fallen and their families during the repatriations. The repatriation ritual itself was held on the town square in the centre of the High Street, by the ancient Town Hall (the building on stilts, now the town's museum) and the war memorial. Historically, this main artery of the town is based on ancient road layouts and has for many centuries been the single most important infrastructural hub for the market town (cf. Crittal *et al* 1970). The town has developed around this public space over time and still today represents the location of choice for key social, economic, cultural and political practices in the community.

The term 'high street' in British English traditionally refers to thoroughfares otherwise known as the 'main' street, which were traditionally the primary location for businesses, such as retail shops, trades, civic and religious institutions. In Wootton Bassett, this is still true today. On this town's main street, there are banks, grocery stores, chemists, opticians, estate agents, the post office, butchers, solicitors, restaurants and take-aways, florists, pubs, tea and coffee shops, a haberdashery shop, a hardware shop, the police, the council offices, the local library and the town museum, charity shops, medical practices, and many others. Many school and leisure facilities are located just off this main road, too. But the further one moves away from the High

Street the more the area is dominated by quiet residential side roads. The High Street is the place to find a decent selection of goods and services covering most residents' basic needs. But this place is not only the commercial centre of the town but also a vital communal and social space. Again, the Town Clerk explained this special character of the High Street in our interview:

Yeah, there is something very unusual about this High Street, actually. It is a wide High Street for a start. There is not many that way, [incomprehensible] is one of the few. Ahm... but it is something about it, because you can see it and of course the Town Hall building is very prominent within that High Street. You can see it from any point in the High Street. I don't know what it is, it's something about it that just brings people together. If we held events, from Christmas Lights and High Street festival events, the High Street has always been the focal point. We actually had a debate once about taking a High Street festival [incomprehensible] it's on the show ground now. And people were outraged because the High Street is a place they can walk to, they can come to easily...

The accumulation of vital trades and services attracts residents to this public space, where they are bound to interact with other residents, and possible visitors, on an everyday basis. But the High Street is also where special events and celebrations are commonly held (and have been in the past). Every year in December for several decades now, Christmas lights have decorated the 60 lime trees along the street. These trees were originally planted to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. On the evening the Christmas lights are switched on, the High Street is closed to traffic and local organisations and clubs set up stalls to sell food and goods to raise money. For Remembrance Sunday in November, a parade is usually led up the street to the central space ('town square') around the old Town Hall. This was even the case before the permanent war memorial had been completed in 2004 and a temporary cardboard memorial had been placed there for the day. Similarly, the annual Carnival and the marches arranged to honour the town for the repatriation ceremonies were also held in the High Street. The Farewell Flypast, the celebration of the Royal Accolade, the Sunset Ceremony and other events between 2007-2011 that I will discuss later or have already mentioned, were all quite naturally placed there. In the same way the most logical place for the new war memorial in 2004 was the central square by the Town Hall. The High Street therefore does not only amount to the real heart and centre of the town because of its geographical location, infrastructural role or historical character; it is the centre of the town because this is where the townspeople perform their collective identity and choose to locate their ceremonies in the most natural and taken-for-granted way. In a way, thus, the community constructs space but space also constructs community.

Before the High Street was remodelled in the 1990s, though, cars used to take up most of the space either in form of parking space or traffic. During this refurbishment, the character of the High Street and its possible uses were transformed considerably. Photographic material from the 1970s illustrates a shift in the public perception and intentional use of this space: the wide High Street used to be lined with parked cars left and right and the traffic passed the old Town Hall on both sides, creating an isolated island on which sat the building, cut off from the human world. Urban planning in the latter part of the twentieth century in Britain luckily moved away again from this car-centric and frankly misanthropic design of public spaces, and new planning trends started to emphasise the importance of creating spaces around and for *people* rather than *cars*. The refurbishment in the mid 1990s provided more space for pedestrians and regulated traffic better. As a consequence, traffic now only flows around one side of the old Town Hall on narrowed lanes, slowed down by several traffic lights, bus stops and pedestrian crossings. Parking has also been limited to a few short-term and disability badge holders' spaces. Residents are thus encouraged to walk, use public transport or use other car parks just off the High Street. The biggest car park belongs to a supermarket and is directly connected to the High Street via a pedestrianized alleyway and a small square called Borough Fields. It directly leads on to the town square with the old Town Hall and the War Memorial.

It is this main town square which has been at the centre of the repatriation ritual for over four years. One of the challenges of describing this area is that this place does not have an official name, which means that it is not necessarily recognised as an enclosed and differentiated entity in itself by the townspeople. In local discourse, people would be more likely to refer to the landmarks situated on or around this space (e.g. the Town Hall, the war memorial or the Post Office) rather than the square itself. Nevertheless, the location of this space and the possibilities for interaction offered by it are key to the following chapters on the events between 2007 and 2011 and I will call it the 'town square' in this thesis. This 'square' was created only during the road refurbishment mentioned above in the mid-1990s. It has now been made available to pedestrians only and is visibly and physically separated from road traffic through bollards and high curbs that enclose the paved area of about 60m long and 10m wide. It stretches from the corner of Wood Street and the small Town Hall Tea Rooms, to a few benches in the shades of the lime trees, past the town's museum in the historic building on stilts and the busy market stalls on Wednesdays, the Post Office, the flagpole next to more donated benches and trees, up to the entrance of Borough Fields and the war memorial. The large square narrows again and is now split between car spaces and a wide pavement in front of the shops. There are a few more

benches on slightly wider pedestrian spaces further down the High Street on both sides and people use them frequently to sit and pause, chat, enjoy a moment in the sun or wait for someone. However, compared to the town square, no other space in Wootton Bassett can compare in size, spatial affordance or historic significance.

Most obviously, the square accommodates the town's history in the shape of the seventeenth-century Town Hall and the weekly market – both icons of this old market town. Yet, this square also remembers its community's losses on the sides of the war memorial, honours individuals on donated benches and makes reference to the monarchy in lime trees that spend shade. The area is not only easily accessible for everyone offering space to sit and chat, or check the community announcement board. It is also located at the intersection of most routes for foot traffic, be it towards the High Street, Borough Fields or crossing over at the pedestrian traffic lights by the square to access the other part of town. In transit, on an errand in the Post Office or chatting to an acquaintance you just ran into – one is bound to end up in this square sooner or later, as it offers itself as a social hub due to its location and design.

The examples of the High Street and the town square of Wootton Bassett help us understand how, and why, certain characteristics of public or private spaces make them more inviting for certain activities or useless for others. Such spaces do not just bear the ghostly intentions of their designers and creators within them, often, they accommodate a multitude of different objects or sub-spaces which were each individually designed for a different purpose. Hence, these spaces can be seen as an accumulation of initial materialised intentions and design purposes, which over time are possibly accepted, renegotiated, contested or re-appropriated. Looking beyond initial use-intentions or functions – spaces, places and objects can tell us more about the human world if we dare to examine how they inhibit or encourage certain kinds of social interaction. Maybe not enough in sociological texts but certainly in human geography the interplay between spatial contingencies and interaction have become an important field of research (cf. Peet and Thrift 2001, Duncan and Savage 1989, Gregory and Urry 1985). Duncan (2001: 244) explains how local spatial variations become socially meaningful:

Space helps define how elements are mobilized for interaction, where particular physical settings, specific in space and time, are associated with typical interactions. These settings are then actively organised and used by participants in the production and reproduction of interaction.

In the case of Wootton Bassett, the High Street, as it is today, is a centre for the community in a historic, commercial, cultural, political and social sense. There was no coherent 'masterplan' for

town planning behind this development but a long list of intentional and unintentional factors that have created contingencies for social interaction and resulted in what the High Street and the town square are for people today. And this is how the repatriation rituals were able to develop here at this point in time.

Contingencies

When the repatriation flights were re-routed to RAF Lyneham in April 2007, a novel way to memorialise the war dead began to be born gradually in Wootton Bassett. In this chapter, I have presented some pre-requisites for the development of this new social phenomenon. The rationale behind this is to create a better understanding of why the repatriations happened *there, then* and the *way* they did. The argument in this chapter is not based on a deterministic approach but explores structural contingencies for social interaction, which are based on social, temporal and spatial factors. First, the influence of the past and the town's close links to the military have been examined. Together with the recent construction of the war memorial, Wootton Bassett emerges as a place that identifies very closely with the armed forces and has only shortly before the re-routing of the repatriations been the centre of a proto-typical repatriation ceremony, when the Hercules crew was laid to rest in 2005. Compared to other towns that also happened to be situated along the repatriation route, Wootton Bassett stands out alone on these grounds.

But these factors were not the only ones considered here. Further, the story about the construction of the war memorial demonstrates the importance of remembrance for the townspeople, but also reflects on the rifts between groups when it comes to the question how to remember 'properly'. Most importantly, however, the story of the war memorial speaks a great deal about social capital and social networking in this small town. It is no surprise that the memorial project only succeeded because the right people with the right connections, social standing and thus power pushed it forward on behalf of a young Cadet. The project was branded from the beginning as the success story of a young girl, who reminded everyone of important collective values. The town's history previous to the first routine repatriation in 2007 thus has provided people not only with a social-symbolic repertoire for war memorialisation, but also with tightly-knit emotional bonds with the forces and high social capital in a group of key actors. Yet again, had it not been for the spatial affordances of the High Street, the town square and the iconic character of the new war memorial in this central space, maybe none of this would have ever happened.

The central spaces in the High Street of Wootton Bassett are inscribed in a reciprocal and mutually constitutive relationship with the townspeople: on the one hand, the town's central square in its physical and material essence enables and even invites the spatial construction of community. At the same time, the meaning of this space is transformed and socially reconstructed, e.g. through community rituals, everyday life movement patterns or the placing of the community's cultural memory. The repatriation ceremonies have had a major impact on the town and certainly transformed its identity in many ways. From 'Wootton Bassett by Swindon' it became 'Wootton Bassett – the town that mourns' and finally 'Royal Wootton Bassett'. The more detailed implications of these changes will be considered in the following chapters.

Chapter 4 A typical repatriation

The repatriation

This chapter aims to introduce the events that are the focus of this research, as a point of reference for a closer in-depth discussion in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. I shall present the main elements of the repatriation ceremonies in Wootton Bassett, as I was able to witness them between 2010 and 2011 and learn about their development in the years prior to that through the research I conducted. First, a few introductory comments are necessary.

As the soldiers' bodies are released by the military world and the hearses leave the airbase to take them to their post-mortem examination, the dead enter a state of liminality between their different spheres of belonging. On their passage from the exclusive world of the military back to their family of origin, the bodies have to pass through the public realm. Be it with a military ceremony by the MoD, the administrative procedure of the post-mortem by state authorities or the family funeral – a specific ritual usually accompanies every instant of a soldier's death. Every stage but one: the transit that led the glass-sided hearses with their flag-draped coffins right through the heart of Wootton Bassett. The small market town not only happened to be situated on the repatriation route. More importantly, the townspeople have marked the passing and repatriation of their own in 2005, before the route was changed two years later and it became only obvious that the same respect should be paid to anyone repatriated through their town. Thus, a ritual to mark the passage and passing of these bodies incrementally developed in Wootton Bassett.

Before examining and analysing these events, an overview of the ritual and its background is necessary. I use the notion 'repatriation ritual' to refer to a (somewhat fixed) set of key ceremonial elements, which developed over time and became reinforced through numerous repetitions of the same sequence of actions and commands. The 168¹ repatriations witnessed by the town allowed a ritual script to come into existence. Further theoretical and analytical implications of this definition shall be dealt with in appropriate length and detail in Chapter 5 but do not belong here. This chapter will develop an ideal typical model of the repatriation ritual, and explore in detail one concrete example, the final repatriation that Wootton Bassett witnessed.

¹ One in 2005 and then 167 between 2007-2011.

The military repatriation

The beginning of the story is a military operational theatre, with soldiers who have died whilst executing their duties in a foreign country, under the orders of the British Government and in the service of the Queen. Mostly hidden from the public eye behind the gates and fences that separate the military world from the civilian world, the bodies of deceased soldiers undergo numerous procedures before their transition to the civilian world can be completed with the return of the bodies to the families.

The repatriation thus starts on the side of the military, where the Ministry of Defence's contractor is responsible for organising and managing the return of the body to Britain. Depending both on where a soldier was on duty and the cause of death, the body will either be transported back to the UK using civil airlines (in countries with a regularised funeral profession) or military aircraft (usually from operational theatres). If death occurs in operational theatres¹, such as during deployment in Afghanistan, it is classified under 'operational deaths' and receives special attention including a post-mortem examination and a full military repatriation. Operational deaths are divided into three categories of fatalities: 1) Killed in Action; 2) Died of Wounds; or 3) Other, which 'include all deaths occurring as a result of accidental or violent causes while deployed and deaths due to disease related causes during the deployment' (cf. MoD Afghanistan casualty and fatality tables 2015). According to these regulations, the repatriation cortèges that passed through RAF Lyneham and Wootton Bassett from April 2007 until August 2011 carried the bodies of service personnel who lost their lives due to hostile action and due to other reasons during Operations Telic and Herrick (see overview below).

¹ Compared to other places of duty, in operational theatres, involvement in combat is likely. Both the engagements of troops in Afghanistan (Operation Herrick, 2001-2014) and Iraq (Operation Telic, 2003-2011) were combat-based operations.

Operations TELIC and HERRICK: key facts and figures

Operation TELIC (Iraq)

- Dates: Started 19th March 2003, combat operations stopped in July 2009 and British troops left in May 2011.
- Numbers: 46,000 British troops deployed in total – the largest deployment since the Second World War, comparable by size only to engagements in the 1991 Gulf War or the 1956 Suez Crisis, exceeding the numbers deployed during the Falklands War or the Korean War.
- Fatalities¹: TELIC included 9,500 reservists and members of the Territorial Army. 179 service personnel died; 136 due to hostile action, 43 due to illness, non-combat injuries or accidents.

Operation HERRICK (Afghanistan)

- Dates: Started 7th October 2001 as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which totals ca. 36,000 troops from 30 contributing countries. The operation ended on 31st December 2014.
- Numbers: Early operations in 2001 and 2002 with comparably small contingents were superseded by Operation Herrick, which saw an increase in personnel in 2006, when ISAF forces moved into the southern province Helmand. The yearly numbers of British service personnel deployed to Afghanistan varied over the years of the conflict. 2006 saw a heavy increase to 5,000 troops and subsequent involvement in heavy fighting and major resistance in Helmand were met by another increase up to 9,500 (October 2012).
- Fatalities²: Major increase in casualty and fatality figures since 2006. In 2009 and 2010, the numbers of operational deaths were roughly twice as high as in previous or subsequent years.
- | | | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|------------------|------------------|
| 2001: 0 | 2002: 3 | 2003: 0 | 2004: 1 | 2005: 1 |
| 2006: 39 | 2007: 42 | 2008: 51 | 2009: 108 | 2010: 103 |
| 2011: 46 | 2012: 44 | 2013: 9 | 2014: 6 | |
- Total: 453 deaths; 89% killed in action or died of wounds.

Death in service

The military part of the repatriation is organised and monitored by the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC). It tasks an outside contractor with the repatriation and care of the deceased, up until the coroner releases the body to the family's funeral director of choice, after a post-mortem examination at the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford. The JCCC's primary task is to inform the family of the death and assist them with further arrangements. The family's

¹ According to the MoD statistics on <https://www.gov.uk/government/fields-of-operation/iraq>, retrieved May 2015.

² According to the MoD statistics published on 15 January 2015 on <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/op-herrick-casualty-and-fatality-tables-released-in-2014>.

wishes are followed as closely as possible and the MoD contractor sets out to return the body as quickly as possible and in the best condition. After a short memorial service that may be held in the military camp where the soldier served (e.g. Camp Bastion in Afghanistan), a military airplane (usually a C-17 aircraft) transports the flag-draped coffin from the operational theatre to an RAF airbase in Britain. RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire was the receiving airbase from 2001 until March 2007 and then again from September 2011 onwards. RAF Lyneham in Wiltshire was used for incoming repatriation flights from April 2007 until late August 2011. Arrived at the destination airbase, a military repatriation ceremony is conducted, to which a limited number of family members are invited, but under no obligation to attend:

The Repatriation Ceremony is in fact a Military event, and the Contractor provides the vehicles and staff to assist with the ceremony in the manner in which the Military require. [sic] (n.a. BIFD Journal 2010: 40)

They are told by the visiting officer that the ceremony is for the military to say farewell to their comrade. Although it is difficult, they can be there, and will be allowed a short time with their loved one, but the family's funeral comes later. (Carr, *Defence Focus* 2013: 9)

The procedures put into place during this phase of the repatriation process mark the gradual transition of the body from the military world back into the civilian world. Even after death, the bodies are still 'soldiered' and the Ministry of Defence retains sovereignty over them until the post-mortem examination has sufficiently recorded and identified the remains – a process that can take weeks. This is not necessarily the case for non-operational deaths of service personnel. If death occurs during duty in a combat zone, however, it is attributed a different significance and thus treated differently.

The military repatriation ceremony

During the military repatriation ceremony at the airbase, the coffins are, one at a time, carried off the plane by a bearer party of six soldiers in uniform and a seventh soldier, who precedes them to co-ordinate the effort. The coffins are simple, rectangular wooden boxes, on which a Union Jack flag has been attached neatly, so that it folds over the sides of the box and seems to seal the coffin. There are three soldiers on each side, who, with their arms interlinked underneath the coffin, carefully carry it on their shoulders. All seven soldiers, i.e. the six bearers and the co-ordinating officer, move in synchrony; they march very slowly and with every step, one foot hovers in the air for a moment, before they set it down and take another step. Arriving at the hearse, the funeral director, in traditional black livery (black top hat, tie, waist coat, jacket, coat, trousers), awaits. The bearers then lower the coffin slowly and carefully load it into the hearse.

They then stand to attention and slowly side-step away from the hearse. A band may occasionally be present, as may the media, but this depends on individual circumstances and ministerial consent (cf. British Army Website: casualty procedures).

The Coroner and local police now take over responsibility for the transfer of the bodies to the post-mortem examination in a civilian hospital. Before the bodies leave the airbase, however, they are taken to a chapel of rest within the base, where families of the deceased are invited to attend a small memorial ceremony as part of an intimate circle (see above). This part of the repatriation is entirely reserved for members of the military and a few close family members – the general public and the media are excluded. Video material is usually only available for the moments when the coffins are being carried from the plane to their hearses. The dead bodies only fully enter the public sphere when the glass-sided hearses leave the gates of the airbase and start their journey to the hospital along public roads. Another transition between realms occurs when – after the full post-mortem examination and DNA identification process – the remains are handed over into the care of the funeral directors of the family's choice. Here, the body passes from the public realm into the private, from the state to the family.

The 'typical' repatriation ritual in Wootton Bassett

On repatriation days, as a matter of habit, countless people in Wootton Bassett used to repeat the same routines to prepare for the events. Two documentary films¹ about the town's effort to remember the fallen depict such routine actions to introduce the audience to the repetitive and ritualistic character of the repatriation ceremonies in Wootton Bassett. For instance, Ken, an elderly veteran, would make sure his brown Army shirt was ironed and take his blazer out of the wardrobe to carefully pass the lint roller over it. Then, dressed with military precision and taking pride in wearing his medals, badges and his brown Royal Army cap, the World War II veteran would climb on his mobility scooter and make his way to the town centre. Kirsty and her team from the Cross Keys pub opposite the war memorial on the High Street would spend the mornings making coffee, tea and sandwiches, which they offered free of charge to relatives and friends visiting the town for the repatriation of their loved one. For many, this would have been the place they could have spent the last minutes before the repatriation in a more private atmosphere, safe from journalists, and meet members of the British Legion who they could have

¹ *BBC* (2010) 'Wootton Bassett: The Town That Remembers' and *CNN* (2009) 'Wootton Bassett: Standing Up for the Fallen'.

asked about the specifics of the repatriation ceremony. Meanwhile, florists and supermarket personnel would make sure their buckets with cut flowers and bouquets were filled. Police officers could be seen in the High Street with sniffer dogs securing the area. Journalists would set up camp with their TV transmission vans in prime spots on the few parking spaces along the High Street. While technicians would still be setting up their equipment in strategically chosen places facing the war memorial, some reporters would already be on the hunt for interviews with local residents or statements by the town council.

Of course, every single time a repatriation cortège passed through Wootton Bassett was a unique event, which, in itself, was inscribed in its particular context. Every soldier was only repatriated once and days don't tend to repeat themselves. At times, there were thousands of people on the High Street for a repatriation, on others days, only a handful watched quietly. A repatriation day in summer 2011 may have been very different from one in early 2007. Nonetheless, these 167 different events in Wootton Bassett are commonly grouped together as belonging to the same category of events: Wootton Bassett's repatriation ceremonies, which slowly developed into a ritual for the public.

Generally speaking, the categorisation of diverse realities under one umbrella term can reduce the amount of information to a manageable level: categorisation and classification are meaning-making practices in which an abundant amount of information about the different constitutive elements is reduced to the characteristics that define these elements as part of a bigger entity. Thus, to group the individual times people marked the passage of a military repatriation cortège through Wootton Bassett under the category 'repatriation rituals' allows people to discuss different events in relation to what they have in common. For example, we could imagine a statement like this: *The repatriation ceremonies in Wootton Bassett are a solemn tribute to those who sacrificed their lives. The whole town falls silent.* On the other hand, there can also be variations from a typical repatriation day: *Only one time, last year, the crowd applauded after the hearses had passed. I think it was inappropriate.*

Here, the first two sentences are used to give information about something that seems to happen every time, whereas the statement about the applauding crowd clearly sets one repatriation event apart as unusual, followed by a statement about the 'appropriateness' of this spontaneous transgression from 'typical' action. The typification of events allows for routine behaviours to develop and for scripts to emerge. It appears that even if we are aware of the infinite diversity of

situations we may encounter, we are creatures of habit with a preference for the predictable, categorisable, comparable – in brief, situations in which we are not lost for pointers for social interaction but we know what to do and what is going on. In scholarly literature, authors like Schütz (1964), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Mead (1967) recognised this and explained how typification is a standard process in everyday life, if not even a pragmatic necessity to maintain an effective level of social organisation. Moreover, since social life is not realised in a controlled experimental environment, every event is unique in its own circumstances. When we talk about ‘typical’ events, we therefore always refer to *ideal*-typical constructs of reality in that they represent an idea or an imagined set of common traits attributed to the constitutive elements of this entity. For Weber (1949 [1904]), these ideal-types hence remain a ‘methodological utopia’.

In the following discussion of the repatriation ritual, two important conclusions will follow from this: first, social interaction is never fully straightforward or predictable and involves differing levels of improvisation, negotiation and adaptation – even during situations, which are thought to be ‘routine’. This, I will explore further in the discussion of ritualisation in Chapter 5. Second, typifications allow social actors to create a sense of stability and order, and make it possible to devise interaction strategies and rules governing a certain set of situations that are constructed as ‘typical’ – as it in fact happened between 2007 and 2011 in Wootton Bassett.

From my perspective as a social scientist examining the emergence of the repatriation ritual, there are two typical constructions I am interested in: one is social and the other analytical. On the one hand, I aim to create a better understanding of how actors’ different spontaneous and often improvised gestures to mark the passage of the coffins started to develop into a set of routine interactions and expectations. The ritual itself emerges from this as a scaffolding that held the different events, actions and symbols together and presented a transferable, repeatable script, whilst offering a degree of flexibility for every individual occasion. To illustrate this point, I have chosen to refer to my field notes from the very last repatriation through Wootton Bassett in August 2011. On the other hand, I will also present (here and in the following chapter) a list of ideal-typical key elements and actors of the ritual by referring to my own artificial construct (and understanding) of a ‘typical repatriation’ for conceptual, analytical and methodological purposes.

Observing the last one: Wootton Bassett's repatriation n° 168¹

On 18 August 2011, a Thursday, Wootton Bassett witnessed the last repatriation cortège to pass through its High Street. Even though on this day, no one knew for certain that this would be the last one, the idea was immanent and people were aware of the fact that the flights were to be officially rerouted to RAF Brize Norton in less than a fortnight on 1 September 2011. It was not predictable at this point whether another death would occur in the meantime but the atmosphere in town on this day spoke volumes; everyone was gearing up for the last one.

In the following paragraphs, drawing on my field notes, I will describe the last repatriation ritual that took place in Wootton Bassett. I have chosen to talk about this particular event as it represents the last instance of a long development of diverse ceremonial acts into a ritual script – an evolution from spontaneous and improvised reactions to specific symbolic acts that welcomed the soldiers' bodily remains back home and marked their passages between physical and metaphysical places.

Thursday, 18 August 2011: Wootton Bassett's repatriation n° 168

15:00² It had rained in the morning and streets were empty until, in the early afternoon, the town suddenly started to fill up with people. As usual, I walk up and down the High Street in the time before the cortège arrives and the ritual begins, write down my observations, take photographs and chat with the people I know.

Compared to more 'ordinary' days in Wootton Bassett, I noticed that the atmosphere in the town centre changed remarkably during repatriation days. By the time I started my fieldwork, the town had already gained international recognition for its effort to show respect to the soldiers and their families. Every repatriation ceremony I witnessed was a high profile event with well-rehearsed elements that did not noticeably change up to the last of the repatriations through RAF Lyneham. This is not to say, however, that there wasn't a degree of flexibility throughout the day and the ritual itself that allowed the people to act in response to every particular situation. The town clerk of Wootton Bassett once described the relationship between fixed and flexible elements in this and other civic rituals to me and talked about the council's responsibility to set the tone:

It's about setting a framework right. ...//... If you know the framework is basically sound, you can bumble away as much as you like inside [laughing] because that's the charm of it. ...//... Because if you know that you have got a strong framework,

¹ Just so that numbers don't get confused, there were 167 regular repatriations between April 2007 and August 2011 and one additional irregular one much earlier in February 2005 – hence n° 168.

² This is a time stamp in a 24-hour format.

everything else within it works well. And I thought a lot about that, I think actually that's what it is about. It's about... somewhere on the line, there is a basic structure that is always going to be right because it is about people caring. Yeah, there are certain things... you were always going to look after the families that came because you need to care for those people because they are in a really horrible place and none of us want to be there. And we want to show our sympathy to them; we want to show our respect for those. So those things are never going to change because that's what's happened, that's what's crucial, important. But the rest of it actually doesn't matter. The rest of it is sort of unimportant and it does bumble along a bit.

One of the elements that had become part of the repatriation day routine was the lowering of the Union Jack flag in the town centre to half-mast, which was usually taken care of by a member of the local British Legion branch in the morning. Both the flag and the pole were only two examples of many donations made to the town expressing gratitude and appreciation for their extraordinary efforts between 2007 and 2011. A few hours prior to the announced passing of the hearses, i.e. usually around lunchtime, the town slowly started to fill up with visitors from out of town: friends and family of the deceased, British Legion (British Legion) members from various branches, members of the Legion's bikers branch, journalists, town criers, and members of the general public (not to forget the occasional researcher). Most visitors seemed to arrive in their own cars and followed the signs to the only central car park, by Borough Fields shopping area, which is a two-minute walk from the central town square with the War Memorial and the Town Hall.

15:20 There are about thirty bikes and a minimum of forty bikers visible (in leather jackets) in their usual spot. By the War Memorial, I can count five town criers (the regulars from Wootton Bassett, Nailsworth, Swindon, Ledbury and Warminster). In the same area, by the benches and the flagpole, I run into a few town councillors I know well and pause for a quick chat. The High Street and above all the central area around the War Memorial are quite packed, even though only one soldier will be repatriated today. There are more people out and about than I have ever seen for any repatriation I have witnessed, let alone for the repatriation of a single person. There is a large group of 'mourners' present, i.e. people in black formal clothes or uniform standing together in small groups in front of the Cross Keys pub or the War Memorial. A photojournalist I know from previous repatriations says hello and we talk about some material we shared, before he is off again, moving stealthily through the crowd. He said he was here for 'supposedly the last one'. There are a high number of elderly British Legion members (all men) in blazers and berets. Some people I pass or stand close to chat with me and joke about the weather. A police officer nearby agrees that there are more people than usual – he recognised me from previous repatriations. I meet the member from the local British Legion branch, who I had interviewed not long ago and who attends every repatriation. There are several TV crews present today, their vans parked on the eastern side of the High Street in the spaces up the street from the War Memorial. I can count ca. thirty to thirty-five standard bearers gathering on the other side of the road. The local Member of Parliament is here, too. So is the chairman of the Wiltshire County Council, and my key contact from the local town council introduces me to both. The MP and I talk briefly about when he will be available for an interview. In reference to the imminent move of

the repatriations to Carterton in Oxfordshire, he says you can't compete with what Wootton Bassett did. That it grew organically; it is important that it is spontaneous. A by-standing local councillor agrees that there are more people here today than usual. He introduces me to friends and chats with the MP.

It used to be almost impossible to predict the start of the repatriation ritual itself, i.e. the ceremonial passing of the cortège through the town centre. The times indicated in the official announcements tended to be estimates but were often surpassed by hours. A journalist from the local newspaper comments:

On our way to Lyneham for the repatriation ceremony crowds had begun forming at the roadside – more than an hour before the procession was due. Inspector Cox said: 'Sometimes these people can be waiting for hours in all kinds of weather but they always turn out in their hundreds.' (SA 25/12/2008)

Some people believed that on some of the flights, injured soldiers were transported to a hospital in the UK first, before the planes could repatriate the fallen to RAF Lyneham. People talked about these and other things while they were waiting for the cortège; more often than not, these were speculations rather than facts from reliable (and verifiable) sources. The local police and co-organisers, however, did confirm to me that, at times, the military memorial service at the airbase took longer than expected since families were given all the space they needed to say their goodbyes. These different circumstances translated into regular delays of the repatriation ceremony in Wootton Bassett's town centre. Thus, even though the ritual itself never lasted longer than 20 minutes (from the first toll of the bell, to the Legion's order that ended the silence and brought the ritual to a close) there was a long build-up to it for hours prior to the passing of the cortège.

The gathering and the waiting turned into an important element of the repatriations that became more and more regular between 2009 and 2010. This time spent together in small groups chatting and exchanging news fostered a sense of community among many people, both local and visiting, and I have heard of many new friendships that formed. When I returned to then *Royal* Wootton Bassett a few months later, I spoke to residents and asked them whether they feel that the town has become a quiet place again and if they welcomed the peace. The surprising answer was that some seemed to miss the fact that they had had a reason to come into town on a regular basis and mingle with their friends, whilst waiting for the hearses.

For out-of-towners, a similar effect could be observed. Many visitors had never been to Wootton Bassett before and allowed for more time in order to be able to find their way around the centre,

maybe have a bite to eat and to warm up in one of the teahouses or pubs. These places tended to be full with people who often recognised each other as outsiders visiting the town for the same purpose and served as meeting points for groups. Contacts were easily made by identifying people through their uniforms: the British Legion blazers and berets, the mourners' formal black clothes, people carrying flowers or wearing poppy badges, wristbands and other insignia that set them apart. Thus, in the time before the ritual, the town centre was very busy with people, buying flowers or paying a visit to the War Memorial. Some regular attendees tended to come to the central town square well in advance in order to assist visitors with any queries they might have about the practicalities of the ceremony: Where should we stand? Can we put flowers on the hearses? What will happen exactly? How do we know who is in which hearse?

After forty minutes, the waiting was over and the families join the crowd on the High Street, which affects the atmosphere noticeably:

15:40 Then, the usual waiting-period comes to an end as the families of the deceased arrive in a small mini-bus at the Town Hall and Big Steve¹ guides them through the crowd to the curb of the road by the War Memorial. Recognising this as a sign that the cortège will soon arrive, the crowd now gets quieter and the atmosphere appears dampened. I found myself a good spot to observe the ritual by the entrance of Borough Fields next to the Post Office.

15:51 The constant moving around and bustling of people slowly dies down and people take up position. There are now clearer distinctions between groups: the town criers stand together, as do the bikers, members of the British Legion, town officials and the general public. As the crowd slowly push into the street, the police ask people to move back on the pavement. There are many professional photographers present today; there are alone six on the standard bearers' side of the High Street, who, with their big lenses, keep on aiming at the mourners opposite them. Quiet chatting continues.

16:00 The mayor arrives in the central area in suit and mayoral chains. He shakes hands with some people. The traffic on the High Street that had slowed down over the past minutes has completely stopped now.

16:05 The standard bearers move to the edge of the pavement on their side of the road; people are even quieter now. The tenor bell of St. Bartholomew's church nearby starts tolling and everyone falls absolutely quiet. The British Legion chaps step forward in one line – there are thirty-eight standards visible.

16:06 Silently, the standards are being raised; a quiet rustling of the flags can be heard even on the other side of the street because it is so quiet now. A police car drives slowly down the High Street; it is the first part of the cortège. The hearses slowly drive up the High Street from Lyneham and stop before they reach the Town Hall and the central square. The funeral director, in a long, black suit in Victorian fashion, with a black top hat and a long walking stick, steps out of the first hearse. He then starts walking in front

¹ For more information see *dramatis personae*, especially page 95.

of the cortège, leading it slowly down the High Street, past the crowds that line the road on both sides (this is called ‘paging’).

16:07 People face forward and the only sound one can hear is the shutters of the cameras clicking ferociously. People stand upright in a dignified way and seem to stare straight ahead, focusing on a virtual point far away (I can only describe it as ‘staring into nothingness’). Some might turn their heads and try to see whether they can spot the cortège already. Hands are folded in the front or interlocked behind their backs (this reminds me of how I was taught to stand and behave in church when I was a child. Take your hands out of your pockets!). The town criers and other men had taken their hats off but the British Legion’s berets are allowed to stay on. Only a slow, rhythmic ‘toc – toc – toc...’ can be heard, as the metal tip of the funeral director’s walking stick hits the asphalt with every second step he takes.

16:08 ‘UP!’ – the command given by a member of the British Legion marks the start of the ritual, as the first hearse approaches the Town Hall. With this command, British Legion members, veterans and soldiers stand to attention; people without military backgrounds stand still in their own fashion. The standard bearers who had held their flags high at first now slowly lower them to the ground, one by one, as the hearses are passing them.

16:10 The cortège, which consists of one black glass-sided hearse with a flag-draped coffin, one empty hearse and an unmarked police car (in this order), now slowly reaches the area on level with the War Memorial. The group of mourners is to their left; the standard bearers are to their right. The pager or funeral director turns around, now facing the front hearse, and the cortège comes to a halt. He takes his top hat off with his left hand and takes a bow to the hearse, then stands still, hat and stick in his hands.

This is the moment when photographers ‘prey’ on the hearses and the mourners and almost move into the road to get a good shot. It is still very quiet, only their cameras are clicking and the hearses’ diesel engines omit a quiet clatter. These faint background noises that would usually be buried in the general bustling of everyday life are pushed into the foreground when the entire town falls silent. There are at least 40-50 mourners on the side of the war memorial. Even the rustling of a rain jacket is loud now. Today, there is a group of British Legion members with white berets (ca. ten elderly men) who line the road between the mourners and the Town Hall, in front of the bikers’ section. By the Post Office along the wall is another line of British Legion members in blazers and berets. It seems there are many more here today than usual. The mayor and the town crier stand back close to the entry into Borough Fields, in front of another lot of British Legion members with khaki berets.

16:13 As the hearses have come to a stop on level with the War Memorial and the family and friends of the deceased, the moment has come for them to say their farewell to the deceased, whose casket is in the hearse in front of their eyes. Mourners use this moment to place flowers or sometimes other objects on the hearses. Some touch the hearses’ glass-sides; many break out in tears and turn to those close-by for comfort. In addition to the sombre soundscape created by the tenor bell, the cameras and the engines – one can hear muted sobbing and people blowing their noses. It takes a long time today.

Sometimes, the mourners do something unexpected; once a group of young men built a scrum around the hearse, shouting and singing. Others put sports club scarves on their friend’s hearse

and beer cans, or started clapping when the cortège passed. This moment is left to the mourners' sole device; they decide how long it goes on for and how they want to mark this moment. Usually, members of the public do not place any flowers on the hearses but simply stand still, paying their respect in silence. If they wish to leave flowers, they do so on the grass verge of the memorial before or after the ceremony.

16:14 The hearses now slowly move down the street while the standards are held 'half high'. This is maybe the largest crowd I have seen. The funeral director pages in front of the cortège up to the end of the High Street, where (out of sight for most people) he will get back into the car once they have arrived at the small roundabout and take off the flowers that would obstruct the driver's view through the wind screen.

16:15 'UP!' The standards are now raised to a horizontal level. This command is the sign for military personnel and ex-servicemen/-women to stand at ease, but still remain absolutely still, with their arms straight down by the side of their bodies. The town criers place their hats back on their heads.

16:16 The bell stops tolling. It is just very quiet now and nothing seems to happen. Cameras have stopped clicking (maybe because the flags are now in their way to focus on the hearses which must now be by the small roundabout at the end of the High Street). It is a very long silence and people start shifting a little bit impatiently, turning their heads to look down the street to see what is taking them so long. The cortège then drives off in normal speed.

16:19 'STANDARD BEARERS DISMISS!' On this command, the standard bearers take one step 90° to their right (clockwise) in the direction of the cortège that is now disappearing, then take the flags down and roll them up. The signal puts an official end to the ritual and sets everything back to normal. People start moving immediately and the long silence is broken.

16:20 The town criers have mostly all disappeared now, only the one in the mobility scooter remains in the central area. The crowd disperses hurriedly; there are some 'was nice meeting you...'s before they walk off the many side roads and alleyways. There are many young people here today (maybe the schools are still on summer break?). The first bikes leave with roaring engines.

16:22 At least twenty per cent of the people are gone already, whereas others are slowly moving away from the central square, using the road as well, as the traffic is still being diverted by the police. People talk normally now; all seems to be back to normal business.

16:25 The bikers' repatriation officer is back with the mourners who still remain in the central area. Cars are still diverted via Station Road, as the High Street remains fairly crowded. I chat shortly with two town councillors. It starts raining again. There are people behind first floor shop windows who curiously look around. There are many serious faces here today, a darker atmosphere than usual. A first film crew has now set up their equipment by the War Memorial to broadcast their news reports. The reporter is loudly practicing his lines and gets into position in front of the monument. The square is almost vacated now.

16:30 The traffic flow is now fully restored and about eighty per cent of people have left. A photojournalist is still pacing the area, stealthily walking around looking to find a good last shot. A member of the British Legion hoists the Union Jack on the central flagpole back up after it had been lowered to half-mast during the day. Some people walk up to the war memorial and look at the flowers, crosses and cards left there. A postman empties the letterbox in front of the Post Office and several camera teams set up their gear close to the memorial.

16:38 Three small groups of mourners are still on the square, they are hugging, some are smiling. The rain is much stronger now. Other people on the High Street now are in majority normal shoppers. The town councillors I talked to earlier are still in the central area chatting to friends. The World War II veteran who usually comes out after the repatriation to tend the flowers that have been left by the memorial is not here today. He used to come here on his mobility scooter with a number of empty vases, a pair of secateurs and fresh water in an empty four-pint milk bottle, to prune the flower bouquets and arrange them on the grass verge around the monument. He also collected the personal notes that people left there and kept them safe at home. The noise level grows with the traffic chaos that is forming due to the large number of people leaving town in their cars.

16:40 Outside the Cross Keys pub are a few men in uniform with pint glasses. The central area is almost deserted now and the news crews have packed in their equipment and are heading back to their vans. Only a few people remain chatting to friends. I decide to leave, too.¹

Dramatis personae: introducing the participants

By the time I started the ethnographic fieldwork and with it a systematic observation of the ceremonies, repatriations days in Wootton Bassett had begun to attract large crowds of people, both outsiders and townsfolk, many attending regularly. The timing of the repatriations had a clear influence on who could potentially attend the ritual; often, the hearses would pass the High Street at a time when most of the workforce were in their nine-to-five jobs, children at school or on their way home. Many of the regular local attendants were indeed pensioners, like many members of the British Legion, or some town councillors. During school holidays, a higher number of children tended to be present. In the following, I will focus on the different groups of participants taking part in the ritual. Some of them played more active roles in it than others; some may have been clearly identifiable through their actions and appearance (e.g. the British Legion standard bearers), whereas others did not demonstrate any particular effort to show affiliation to a group. I recognised particular patterns during my fieldwork that led me to the following categorisation of the individuals present during the repatriation ceremonies.

¹ Full duration: 1h 40 min. Ritual: 11 minutes.

It is important to keep in mind that the groups I identify below are again ideal-typical categorisations. ‘Group’ is a tricky notion to pin down and can refer to (separately or simultaneously) internal and external identification processes. The descriptions below reflect my own interpretation and understanding of the observed and are presented in this way in order to facilitate the analytical process. One ought not forget that they remain simplifications and generalisations of a much more complex reality. For example, when I present the group that I called ‘the mourners’, the group name only provides an identificatory shell. Consequently, the individuals who made up a given group of mourners during a particular repatriation are not the same who constituted the group on the previous repatriation. The creation of such an ideal-typical classification, however, allows me to analyse a set of commonalities and differences that typically existed between this and other groups.

The Royal British Legion

One of the key groups for the organisation of the ritual in Wootton Bassett was the local branch of the Royal British Legion. Founded in the aftermath of the First World War, the British Legion is a non-profit organisation or charity, which provides support to current and former members of the British Armed Forces. It is famously known for its ‘Poppy Appeal’ a fundraising effort that started in 1922 and has become an institution, if not the figurehead of British war commemoration practices. Every year for Remembrance Day, members of the British Legion produce and sell millions of red poppies badges and wreaths. Additionally, the British Legion is also the key organiser of the parades and wreath-laying events, which traditionally take place on the 11 November at 11am every year (or the nearest Sunday) in most British towns and villages. More importantly, however, the individual British Legion branches act as local ‘memory keepers’ more generally for their communities by maintaining war memorials, keeping a roll of honour and marking the passing of veteran members. According to the organisation’s records in 2013, the organisation works in 2,500 local branches and comprises about 360,000 members (cf. British Legion website 2013). Whereas membership is open to everyone, most members appear to have either served in the forces themselves or have close personal links to the forces.

The group of individuals I would like to introduce in the context of this research refers to those members of the Legion, who openly identified themselves by showing their affiliation to the organisation through their appearance and the ceremonial tasks in which they were involved. The traditional full uniform for male members of the British Legion consists of a black blazer,

black trousers and shoes, a white shirt, white gloves, a tie and a beret¹. Both the tie and the beret come in different colours according to the unit with which a person served during their time in the Armed Forces. Someone, who served with the RAF Police Association, I was told, would wear a white beret; maroon stands for the Parachutes, a certain shade of green for the Marines, etc. Many British Legion members display their medals at special occasions on their blazers and sometimes decorate it with poppy badges. The British Legion crest is usually worn as a sewn-on badge (appliqué) or embroidery, symbolically placed on the left side of the blazer, 'over the heart'. The Wootton Bassett branch of the Legion had taken the decision not to wear any medals on their blazers for the repatriation ceremonies in respect for the deceased and their families. Members from other branches and the visiting standards bearers, however, often wore their full insignia.

During the repatriation ritual, the space available on both sides of the High Street was divided between the various participant groups. Some spaces were (unofficially) reserved for some groups due to their involvement in the ritual, whereas other areas were in theory open to anyone but in practice often occupied by the same people. The British Legion's standard bearers had claimed a stretch of the eastern side of the road directly opposite the War Memorial and the place where the families were and the hearses would come to a stop.

¹ Female British Legion members were rare and usually dressed in similar uniforms with minor alterations to the cut, the tie, shoes and the option of wearing skirts. Variations in the uniforms are possible.

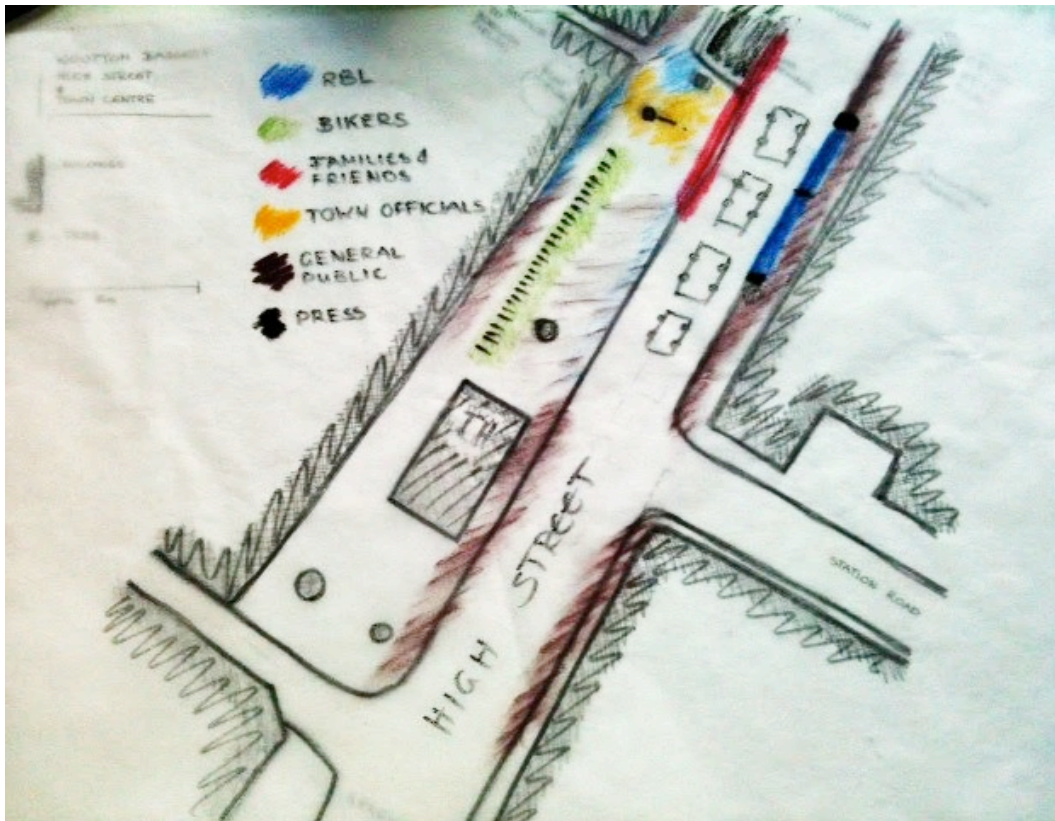


Illustration 1: The distribution of groups during the ritual in the High Street area

These representatives of British Legion branches from all over Britain used to line their side of the street and, following different commands, raise or lower their standards side-by-side. These commands were widely audible during the ritual and marked the different sequences of it, as well as the end of the silence. Thus, the standard bearers were not only located at the prime spot on the High Street, their actions also defined the ritual in various ways. During the repatriations I observed, I counted between 22 and 38 flags at any time and noticed that a black ribbon had been added to each as a symbol for mourning. But the standard bearers were only a small group of British Legion members attending the repatriations on a regular basis. Many men and women in blazers, berets and with different medals and badges could be seen in small groups from the Town Hall to the War Memorial on the western as well as the eastern sides of the High Street. Especially the War Memorial on the main square was a meeting ground for local members of the British Legion, and the area around it also offered plenty of space for users of mobility aids (as there were quite a few) to comfortably situate themselves without creating an obstruction. Notably, most British Legion members I was able to observe on repatriation days seemed to be veterans of the Second World War or the Korean War and probably over seventy years old. This could have a number of reasons, e.g. the greater availability of pensioners during weekdays but

could also be related to the demographics of the British Legion's membership base. A much younger group of British Legion members set itself very clearly apart in Wootton Bassett: the Royal British Legion's Riders Branch.

The 'Bikers'

Formed in 2004, this side-branch of the British Legion was set up by motorcycle fans with close links to the British Armed Forces (most members are ex-services). Gradually, a group of the British Legion Riders Branch members became key actors for the Wootton Bassett repatriations. They created the role of 'repatriation liaison officer', performed by 'Big' Steve Blundell, a tall ex-serviceman and biker, whose task it became to greet the soldiers' families on the repatriation site and guide them through the crowd to the curb of the road by the memorial (the mourners' designated space). He and his deputies were also involved in managing the different groups of visitors and offering support and information before, during and after the ritual. Over his Bluetooth earpiece, Big Steve was always visibly connected to the police and the first one in the town centre to know when the cortège had left the airbase and was finally approaching Wootton Bassett. Steve's presence in the town centre before the start of the ritual was hard to be missed; he proactively approached visitors, talked to family and friends of the deceased to express his condolences on behalf of everyone present, and seemed to almost direct certain parts of the scene.

The bikers became a more common sight in Wootton Bassett following their involvement in the repatriation ceremonies and started to attend other public events in the town as well. For instance, a few group members were present during the Hercules Farewell Flypast (01 July 2011); many attended the Sunset Ceremony (31 August 2011) and then came the next day to the opening of the Memorial Garden in Carterton (01 September 2011). They also attended the Royal Event (16 October 2011) and an affiliated group organised rides through Wootton Bassett on Mothers' Day in 2010, 2011 and 2012 to raise money for military charities. Since the repatriations had been moved to Carterton/Brize Norton, this annual *Ride of Respect* alternates between Carterton and Royal Wootton Bassett and now includes a weekend-long festival. The bikers' presence in the town at repatriations was a controversial issue for some. This was partly because they were considered outsiders and the negative image of longhaired, leather-vested rockers, but also based on a clash between the town's policy of non-interference and neutrality toward the ritual and the British Legion riders' tendency to try and 'manage' elements. I will

explore these conflicting dynamics in subsequent chapters, when I discuss the dialectic of local and national interpretations of the repatriations.

During my fieldwork, it was an easy task to recognise and take account of the British Legion bikers because they used to gather in their bike gear on the main square between the Town Hall and the Post Office, where they also parked their bikes in one neat row. At any of the repatriations I observed, I counted around twenty to thirty motorbikes and between thirty and sixty individuals who visibly identified themselves as members of this group. The bikers had devised their own 'uniform' based on the sort of black leather vest (often without sleeves) that is commonly associated with groups of 'rockers' or bikers. Onto those, the badge of the British Legion was sown on the left hand side (again, over the heart) and the insignia of their unit were placed on the right side of the vest. To express individual interests, affiliations or memories, members often seemed to accumulate different badges and pins on the remaining space on their vests. Often, there were many more visibly identifiable bikers present at any given repatriation than could have arrived in Wootton Bassett on the bikes I counted for that particular day. Many, thus, must have made the effort to slip into their British Legion bikers' 'uniform' and to join the others where the bikes were parked, even though they may have arrived in cars rather than on a motorcycle. The original utilitarian nature of leather jackets as protective gear for bikers had long been turned on its head by the rocker subculture and these vests or jackets now commonly serve as screens on which certain affiliations, beliefs and personal memories can be displayed. The Legion's traditional blazer culture does not allow such a great degree of individualisation and conveys a much more conformist, conservative, formal and honourable appearance. Further, the difference between the older generation of blazer-and-medal-wearing British Legion members and the younger leather-vested bikers was not only based on generational differences. There seemed to be a deeper conflict of identity between these different groups of ex-servicemen, as well as more generally a rather critical perception of the bikers within the circle of groups involved in the repatriation.

The motorbikes would usually be parked directly on the square, a space normally left to pedestrians only, whilst their owners lined up close to their vehicles during the ritual. I found this practice odd and wondered why the bikes were not parked elsewhere, off the High Street, as drivers would do with their cars. But arranging the bikes in such a fashion on the main square had several effects. On the one hand, the bikes created a physical barrier delimiting one area from another. This material boundary was simultaneously symbolic as it claimed the space for

the group and physically shut others out (for me, it was hard but not necessarily impossible to squeeze through but it felt like a transgression). Additionally, the bikes functioned as visible props to underline the shared identity of this group: bikers, soldiers, veterans with common memories and interests. Lined up side by side, the handlebar tilted in the same direction – the motorcycles were arranged themselves in a soldierly manner, as it were, standing to attention. Some owners had customised their bikes and added flags, stickers or painted on themes related to their military past. One of them, for example, had the shape of the Falkland Islands lined out on his tank. Someone else's bike showed a scene of the Iraqi desert. Another person had added dates of a tour of duty; many displayed poppies and similar remembrance-related symbols as well as flags and banners of different sizes.

To mark community and belonging in such a way seems to have been of great importance for many members of the British Legion's Riders Branch, just as it was important for regular Legion members to wear their blazers, berets and medals. Not just the actions performed in these attires made reference to war commemoration. More importantly, these symbols of belonging and referents to both individual and shared memories that were part of their uniforms played their own active role because they situated the performed actions during the ritual within a certain framework of reference or context for interpretation. To look at them as costumes or props would not give credit to the vital role they fulfil conveying people's actions with pointers that set the tone and situate the scene within a larger field of symbolic interaction, i.e. war commemoration practices. Just as we dress up for formal events like weddings, these were the ritual costumes and props developed and deemed appropriate for the repatriation ritual. It was this group's way of 'branding' the event in symbolic imagery.

The 'Town Officials'

As 'town officials' I will describe all those individuals regularly present at the repatriations who occupied an official (political) role within the town at the time. This includes Wootton Bassett's mayor, town or county councillors, town clerk and council office employees, as well as the local town crier and his colleagues from the area. I have chosen to group these individuals together under one term for a number of reasons: first, most of these individuals consciously chose to attend the ritual in concordance with their public roles as representatives or leaders of the community. This is above all the case for the mayor and the town crier, who, in their ceremonially significant roles usually attend all events deemed important to the community. In a small town like Wootton Bassett, the town councillors do not simply play a role as political

representatives for their respective wards. More importantly, it is commonly the case that these individuals also help organise community gatherings and celebrations throughout the year and are in many cases actively involved in the different clubs, associations or churches that dominate social and cultural life in such small towns. Most of the members of the town council have served one or indeed several terms in office as mayor¹ of the town and have represented the community at official functions in this role. In Wootton Bassett particularly, the town council with its councillors, office workers, town clerk and town crier appeared to me like a well-oiled machine of people who keep in close contact with each other above and beyond their official roles. Communication and problem-solving often works at an informal level and many of them can look back at a long history of working together as a group in the service of the community. The story of the War Memorial, which was told in the past chapter, is an excellent example for the closeness and proactive attitude of the town's officials.

The further distinction of this group of individuals from others attending the repatriations is based on spatial and visual markers. At the centre of the town square, between the War Memorial and where the flagpole, bench and tree are – is the spot where the town's officials would usually meet, watch the hearses pass by and pay their respects. This place put them right behind the line of 'mourners' (family and close friends of the deceased) and between the other main groups: the British Legion, the bikers and the general public. Spatially speaking, this group did not visibly claim this space by delimiting it in any way. Often, elderly individuals came to rest on the bench and a few regular visitors had found their favourite spots there, too. Reflecting on the use of space by the different groups identified so far, the town officials certainly could be found in one of the most central areas during the ritual. I had the impression, however, that their 'spatial rank' was taken-for-granted by the participants of the ritual, it did not have to be negotiated as such or visibly delimited. In fact, apart from the mayor who would wear the mayoral chains (a sort of heavy metal necklace) and the town crier in his historic uniform and large hat, the town councillors and other officials present did not stick out in the crowd through any kind of particular clothing, which could range from casual to formal.

The town officials did not have any active roles during the ritual; they did not get involved, give commands, usher people or actively offer information. Their role was to be present in a somewhat removed and passive way, showing support without managing the situation. Behind the scenes, however, the town council was heavily involved in the planning and implementation

¹ In England, most town councils choose their mayor from amongst them. Town mayor is a ceremonial role only and the term in office lasts for one municipal year.

of certain security measures, as well as providing useful information to the public, organisations and the media about the repatriations.

In an interview with Wootton Bassett residents Ken and Ingrid, they point out a few more people they call 'VIPs' and who belong to the same group:

Ken: Oh and then there's a kind of little, it's wrong to call it a 'group', but they are there - let's call those the VIPs if you like. Where you would get, James Gray [MP], he's a great attendant a very punctilious attendant, somebody from Wiltshire Council, the chairman...

Ingrid: We've seen Bob there...

Ken: ...Robert Hall, yeah, and the mayor obviously...

Ingrid: ... in his chains...

Ken: ... so there's a little cluster of VIP but they don't necessarily stay as a group or they don't necessarily stick to the centre of attention by the memorial, you know. For very obvious reasons: they don't want to appear to be in the centre of attention.

The 'Mourners'

This term takes in those who had direct personal or familial links to the deceased servicemen and -women whose repatriation ceremony they had come to attend in Wootton Bassett. What distinguishes this group from others is that they had known the person in the flag-draped coffin personally, spent some time in their lives together, maybe in service, or back in school, as neighbours, or relatives. When for most attendees of the ceremony the coffins represented a more abstract idea of *a fallen soldier*, for members of this group, it was *a particular person*. I had started to call this group of individuals 'mourners' after I had observed a few repatriations and started to recognise patterns in the use of the space and the roles of different people during the ritual. At the same time, local residents Ken and Ingrid also identified this group as 'the mourners':

Ken: Well, there's the, you know, the mourners, the family and the friends, that's one distinct group in the middle...

Ingrid: ...then the...

Ken: Not always but usual dressed in black, certainly the women...

Ingrid: They have just come from Lyneham...

Ken: Yeah, that's a distinct group.

Ingrid: And they are certainly dressed in very sombre dressing and they are upset. This is the thing, you know, as a mother standing there. But I think it does give them a lot of comfort when the hearse stops and then of course they all stop to put the flowers on top of the roof.

This group differentiated itself from others spatially at first, as they were asked to stand directly by the roadside on level with the memorial, opposite to the standard bearers. This was the exact spot where the hearses would come to a short stop during the ritual and the mourners would have the opportunity to put flowers on top of the hearses before the cortège continued its journey. Here, it is important to mention that the families were not present during the early days of the repatriation ceremonies in Wootton Bassett and only started to join the townspeople after word had spread. After some time, their presence and role during the ritual became institutionalised and elements of the ritual were adapted in respect for the bereft. By the start of my fieldwork, the ‘mourners’ had already become an integral part of the ceremony. Transport would be arranged for the close family to attend the ceremony in Wootton Bassett right after the memorial service at the airbase in Lyneham. Since only a small number of close family members were invited to the military ceremony, others usually gathered in the town centre before the cortège passed. The Cross Keys pub just across the road from the war memorial welcomed friends and family members of the soldiers and offered them free refreshments whilst providing a space where they could be amongst themselves and not bothered by the press. The pub’s landlady had appealed to the public and the press to preserve this safe space for those dealing with personal loss and grief. For many ‘mourners’, the pub also became the go-to place directly after the repatriation ceremony, too.

The group hence distinguished itself from others by the exclusive use of certain spaces before, during and after the ceremony. Be it in the pub or at the curb of the road, others usually made space for them out of respect for their personal loss. In visual terms, the members of this group were also often set apart from the rest of the crowd through black and formal dress as it is traditional for people in mourning. Colleagues of the deceased often attended in groups and in their respective uniforms. The last aspect that distinguished this group of people from others was their role in the ritual: to step out in the road when the hearses had stopped, place flowers on the hearses and both welcome the dead back home but also bid them farewell on their journey to the morgue.

The media

The local, national and international media was interested in the repatriation ceremonies in Wootton Bassett and sent photographers, journalists and entire camera teams to the town to report from each event. The media attention grew over time: at the beginning, it was mainly reporters for the local newspaper who attended but, by 2010, the repatriations were covered by two or more camera teams at the least. A group of independent news photographers would stealthily move through the crowds before the cortège arrived and then try to find the best position during the ceremony to score their best-selling shot. It was hardly difficult to spot members of the media within the crowds, as they would be easily identifiable through their gear (notepads, cameras, microphones, satellite vans with logos). Formally dressed news reporters could usually be seen hovering around the vans or the people they were trying to interview. Those teams that arrived in Wootton Bassett with their small transporter vans were asked to park in the marked parking zone adjacent to the Cross Keys pub on the High Street. This is where they would set up camp before the ritual, while the cameramen were on the High Street setting up their cameras before all the good spots were taken to film the crowd and the cortège or to interview people. Commonly, several camera teams and photographers set up their equipment on the (eastern) side of the road opposite to the war memorial, next to the standard bearers. Due to a slight bend in the High Street at this point, if a camera was mounted high enough on a tripod, it was able to capture the entire passing of the cortège as well as focus on the mourners on the other side of the road and film their often very emotional reactions to the arrival of the hearses. After the ceremony, members of the media were usually the ones who would remain in the central area of the High Street the longest; either to interview people or film short statements or reports by their correspondents. A favourite place for these kinds of reports was at a point on the town square where the flagpole and the war memorial could be seen in the background behind the speaker.

Police

The police had different roles during repatriation days in Wootton Bassett. On the one hand, they would coordinate the safe passing of the cortège and the traffic on the High Street whilst passing through the town centre. Several police cars accompanied the hearses, driving in front and behind in marked and unmarked cars, as well as motorbikes. Apart from that, officers with sniffer dogs used to control the High Street and adjacent areas in the morning before the ceremony to check for explosives. Directly before, during and after the ceremony, the police regulated the traffic and brought general traffic to a stop during the ceremony. Small teams

would also patrol through the crowds and manage all access routes for pedestrians or cars from and to the High Street and the central area. Most police officers were clearly identifiable through their uniforms.

General public

The category 'general public' includes all those people attending any repatriation ceremony I observed who did not belong to any of the categories named above. The general public were the majority of people present during the ceremonies. It includes civilians from the town itself, visitors, High Street shop owners or staff who stepped out for the duration of the ritual, school children on their way home or anybody else who happened to be in the High Street when the hearses passed. These individuals would stand (or sit on the benches) wherever was the most convenient, often in small groups, dispersed all along both sides of the road. Before the ritual, these small groups of people would often form well in advance and I could observe how many people used the opportunity to walk around and say hello to the people they knew and have a chat with them. Some seemed to be regularly attending the repatriations and already had their own habitual spot, from which they observed the ritual. I was introduced to some regulars who came to Wootton Bassett for almost every repatriation ceremony. They appeared to have invented their own individual 'remembrance uniforms', which were made up of an array of objects like remembrance badges, poppy pins, charity wristbands or other branded paraphernalia worn on every occasion. Rather than being perceived as a mere visitor, the claiming of space and identity came across as an effort to 'belong', as an insider, to the ceremony. This could be related to the discourse in the media, where it was commonly portrayed how 'the town' or the 'townspeople' turned out for every repatriation. In reality, however, nobody was able to discern the proportion of out-of-towners in the midst of this group that I call the 'general public'.

Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, I have developed an ideal-typical model of repatriation and Wootton Bassett's response emphasising the key elements and participants of the ritual. In the process, I argued that the actual journey of the cortège between the airbase and the hospital marks its symbolic passage from one realm of belonging to another, being in a state of liminality on its transit through the town centre of Wootton Bassett. The detailed examination of typical ritual practices and the particular case of the last repatriation allowed us to understand the improvised character of this ritual. Over four-and-a-half years, an organic process of negotiation

has turned this accumulation of accidental coincidences, ad-hoc decisions, cultural repertoires, and spatial opportunities into a singular ritual script. The following chapters are therefore dedicated to the analysis of this process of ritual-making, consolidating and dismantling, whilst making reference to the elements presented above.

Chapter 5 Ritualisation

What is ritualisation?

Ken: What are we talking about? We are talking about a cortège on its way from Lyneham where the aircraft landed to the, to the blooming autopsy in the Radcliffe Hospital. And it's just passing through this particular place.

Aline: But that's not just it, is it, today?

Ingrid: Not anymore! No.

Ken: No.

'What began with a handful of veterans saluting the passing cortege soon developed into a simple ritual involving larger and larger numbers of people.' (*BBC News* 12/10/2008)

In this chapter, I want to capture the spirit of this development of a spontaneous effort that became a routine practice and was soon taken for granted, yet one that never lost its extraordinary touch. Ever since the first repatriation cortege passed through the main street of Wootton Bassett, normal town life was put to a temporary standstill during the ritual: traffic was stopped by the police escort and those who had gathered by the War Memorial paid their respects. In this special time and place that interrupted everyday life, a ritual started to develop incrementally. None of what happened in the years after the first repatriation through Lyneham in April 2007 was anticipated beforehand – in fact, many people expected the spontaneous display of respect by townsfolk to die down after some time. But somehow, nobody seemed to get quite used to the cortèges, the coffins, the flags and the announcements of yet another dead soldier passing through the midst of town. These moments when the hearses drove slowly and quietly through never were considered part of everyday life. Instead, they turned into a ritual that marked these special occasions by drawing the elements into an improvised framework of understanding that 'normalised' the events without ever rendering them 'banal'.

In the following, I will trace this process of initial improvisation and incremental normalisation of the repatriation ritual. This will be partly a tale about the messy business of everyday life, unpredictable events and the interplay of contingencies. The other part, however, will explain that no matter how unpredictable the human world may be, it is part and parcel of the modern human condition to render the unexpected into something less challenging, that is either made to

fit existing models or used to reformulate our perception thereof. The ritualisation process that I want to trace and analyse here is in itself a strategic redefinition of practice. In essence, it is an example of an improvised response to a complex situation that presented itself to local actors. Improvisation is often referred to as ‘making something up’, an impromptu act whose outcome we cannot know in advance, something that can not be foreseen (i.e. the literal translation of the Latin ‘improvisus’). Instead of it being a purely creative activity, however, improvisation as social interaction does not start *tabula rasa*. Rather, we improvise within known frameworks of language, symbols and norms that usually apply to certain situations, that are available to us in order to make sense and be understood. What constitutes a ‘social act’ is that it is recognisable and intelligible as such (i.e. both an act and social) and not perceived as random and non-purposive. From this follows that the act of improvising cannot move freely in a world of infinite possibilities. Rather, improvised action picks from an array of contingencies – outcomes which are *possible* but not *necessary*.

From these preliminary thoughts on improvisation as a reaction to the unexpected follows my understanding of the ritualisation process in Wootton Bassett. It will show how a sense of continuity and order (or at least an illusion thereof) is created and negotiated in this practice of solidifying the fluid, the contingent and the unexpected. Notably, though, we will find out that the scripted ritual that emerges remains an idealtypical imaginary or construct with a flexible reality – a consolidated and reified text whose actualisation or performance remains open to more improvisation and responsive to contingencies.

Classic social theory in the vein of Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, Robert Merton and many others has made a considerable effort to address social action in all its intricacies. My analysis presented in this chapter makes reference to them whilst trying to give theory a different twist. The ritualisation process in Wootton Bassett – or at least my own interpretation thereof – challenges us to analyse the very instance in which actors (more or less consciously) engage in a meaning-making process. Karin Barber (2007: 25) explains that when we study creative processes and improvisation, the challenge lies in understanding ‘the fluidity of social processes in relation to the almost universal human effort to fix things’. And it is during improvisation and ritualisation when we can observe them best. For Barber (2007), the social world is mostly understood through two models, one which starts with the idea that stability is the norm (cf. Durkheim 1995), whereas the other one perceives it to be constantly changing (cf. Mead 1932). What I think is more important, however, is not as Barber argues ‘how to account for the social creation

of continuity' (2007: 26) but to understand how a *shared sense of continuity* is constructed socially in a world in which no day resembles another. What this does is moving the discussion to the role of situational models that allow social actors to construct a shared sense of continuity, repetition and routine.

In fact, casting away the vocabulary of continuity and change for a moment, what we are talking about now goes back to the basic definition of social action – action that makes reference to an intersubjective framework of understanding between actors. It is the shared understanding of meaning that puts the 'social' into social action (cf. Weber 1978: 4ff). Only because something continues to make sense does it manage to create and maintain a sense of continuity even in situations of great change and challenge to pre-existing frameworks of understanding. Put simply: if things stop making sense then they stop being social and become random, non-rational, non-purposive or at least unintelligible to others.

Clifford Geertz (1993) partially addresses this point in his essay on 'Common Sense as a Cultural System' (pp. 73-93). He talks about how common-sense knowledge is used to make sense of everyday occurrences – as inconsistent, unexpected and inexplicable they may be – and reintegrate them within this shared cultural system of understanding the world: 'Common sense seems to us what is left over when all these more articulate sorts of symbolic systems have exhausted their tasks, what remains of reason when its more sophisticated achievements are all set aside.' (Geertz 1993: 92). To Geertz, anthropology should try to understand how culture is 'jointed and put together' (p. 93), key to which is our ability to deal with the inconsistencies of life through common sense. Because common sense knowledge is often simple, 'immethodical' and imprecise (Geertz 1993: 90), it offers a degree of malleability to be used in any situation that requires it; 'Men plug their dykes of their most needed beliefs with whatever mud they can find', he explains (Geertz 1993: 80). This brings us back to the discussion of contingencies, unexpected situations and how we manage to deal with them. What I called a 'shared sense of continuity' earlier is the essence of Geertz' idea of cultural glue, embodied in common sense. In his essay, he emphasises the importance of understanding where this sense of continuity comes from yet admits that he does not have a clear answer to how this should be done within sociological or anthropological studies:

... one cannot do so by cataloguing its content ...//... One cannot do so, either, by sketching out some logical structure it always takes, for there is none. And one cannot do so by summing up the substantive conclusions it always draws, for there are, too, none of those. One has to proceed instead by the peculiar detour of evoking its general

recognized tone and temper ...//... There is something (to change the image) of the purloined-letter effect in common sense; it lies so artlessly before our eyes it is almost impossible to see. (Geertz 1993: 92).

At the same time, Geertz has offered us the hints we needed to turn his theoretical understanding of the cultural world into a methodological tool. Seeing common-sense knowledge as ‘shamelessly and unapologetically ad hoc’, catering ‘at once to the pleasures of inconsistency’ and to the ‘intractable diversity of experience’ (1993: 90), he recognised the importance of the *processual* character of meaning-making within a cultural system. Because of a pre-existing framework of understanding the world – a cultural repertoire if you like – we are able to deal with the unexpected, the contingent. At the same time, and this is important, we have a dialectical relationship to these frameworks as we are *meaning-making* and *meaning-using* at the same time. In short, these repertoires allow us to do things without having to think about it.

Unexpected situations threaten our constructed sense of continuity in that they challenge our routines and demand for adjustment; they don’t make sense in the way we expected events to unfold. Or in the words of Scottish political philosopher David Hume (1978: 446) ‘everything that is unexpected affrights us’. How would someone know what to do in an unexpected situation? In Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, he argues that social action (or ‘practice’ in his preferred terms) *happens* but this doesn’t mean it *just* happens (Jenkins 2002: 69-70; Bourdieu 1977). For Bourdieu, the answer here lies within what he called a practical logic or a ‘feel for the game’. In what we do, we reflect what we ‘know’ in the sense of a *savoir-faire* (Bourdieu 1990: 61). His concept of *habitus* refers to exactly this: a social competence or an implicit (and mostly unconscious) knowledge of the ‘grammar’ of the social world. The ‘art’ of improvisation also figures in Bourdieu’s concept of social practice in that he, like others before him, argues that life is too complex to have a rulebook for everything and therefore improvisation is necessary (Bourdieu 1977: 8). Bourdieu scholar Jenkins himself picks up on this problematic and explains that ‘if we had to make a decision about everything, we’d never be able to make a decision about anything’ (2004: 70). This hits the proverbial nail on the head.

In the context of this chapter, what I am interested in is how meaning was constructed out of chaos, the unexpected and ambiguities in Wootton Bassett. Stability in the absolute sense of the word will be abandoned for the sake of a study of processual change and how the contingent is integrated in a continuous understanding of being. How is actual action rendered socially

meaningful or symbolic? And how are different individual acts tied together logically to categories of action, e.g. the repatriation ritual(s)?

How it all started: why there, why then and why did people bother?

In the four years during which the repatriation flights from Afghanistan and Iraq landed in RAF Lyneham, people in Wootton Bassett turned out to pay their respects by the roadside on 167 occasions. Only a few, however, are aware that the very first repatriation cortège passed through Lyneham and Wootton Bassett not in April 2007 but in February 2005.

Aline: ... so it all started in April 2007, right?

Councillor Chris: Well, you could say that or you could go back or look at it this way: Would we have had repatriations if we didn't have a war memorial to be a focal point? The answer is, you don't really know. But I think that gave a focal point to people to gather. Then in February 2005 or the end of January 2005, or beginning of February, there was a Hercules shot down in Baghdad and nine airmen from Lyneham Parish died. ...//... Basically, I think, that was probably the start because it *set a standard*. ...//...

They were supposed to come through at quarter to five; they didn't come through till quarter to seven. Of course the BBC broadcast what was going on over the radio and the television, as more and more people turned up. And when it came to quarter to seven, and it was a cold and wet night, our town was laying both sides from the Wagon and Horse right up to the roundabout at this end, probably anything from two to four and more deep. (*Emphasis added*)

This proto-type repatriation ceremony was held for a local crew of airmen, who died in service in Iraq and received special permission to be brought back through their home base and not, as it was usual at the time, through RAF Brize Norton. The Town Clerk remembers the night of this first repatriation:

Johnathan: The thing about the timeline is interesting in my view. ...//... Most people say that they started in 2007 but I don't think that's quite true. Back in 2005, there was a Hercules that was brought down. And my understanding of the story is that the station commander at RAF Lyneham [name] wanted the crew to be repatriated through his station at RAF Lyneham. ...//... Now what happened that night was that the town, that has had very long and very close associations with RAF Lyneham ...//... turned out to pay its respect to the ten airmen¹ that had lost their lives. And I think that that, if you like, set a *marker* down. It was something about the town turned out and paid its respect. It was not seen as something extraordinary at the time but that's what the town did because it was an RAF Lyneham crew. (*Emphasis added*)

¹ In fact, ten servicemen died in the crash but only nine of them were members of the RAF (eight of whom were based at Lyneham). This may be the reason why Johnathan and Chris used different numbers in their accounts.

Aline: How did people know about it?

Johnathan: The air crash had been publicised in the press and so with the very close links with RAF Lyneham people knew when it was coming back. People knew that that was happening, it is a small community and very obviously lots of people at Lyneham know lots of people in Wootton Bassett and people would ask. It wasn't a secret. It wasn't a... they weren't bringing them through the High Street in a secret convoy - that wasn't the idea. It was an opportunity for people to show their respect and they did! That night, they lined the street and there were I think probably... certainly hundreds of people turned out, I think maybe even thousands.

To begin with, I asked my participants to explain to me what had triggered this process of ritualisation here in this town and therefore provide hints why something similar had not happened before, somewhere close to RAF Brize Norton for example, prior to the route change. Of all the towns and villages on the hearses' journey to the hospital in Oxford, and all the years these trips had already been taking place – how come it was in 2007 and in Wootton Bassett that people decided to acknowledge the fallen with whom they notably did not have any obvious personal connections?

Strikingly, both Chris and Johnathan gave an almost identical answer to this question, independently from each other and at different times. This may be explained by the roles and statuses they hold within the community and above all the local town council. Johnathan's position as town clerk, which he has held since 1987, puts him in a frontline position in the public administration of this town. Chris, for me, personified a hub of social networks in the community, bridging the gap between political, social, cultural, professional and administrative groups and their decision-making processes. Their identical approach to explaining how this phenomenon started bears witness of the mutual relationship between these two key actors (and in fact a handful of others, too, as we will find out later). Individual stories gradually merged, and a more commonly accepted interpretation of the events seemed to have appeared over time, as we can see here. Johnathan and Chris provide a number of clues as to why and how it all started in Wootton Bassett, which I will address one by one.

As they both agree, the incident of 2005 must have 'set a standard' somehow (see emphases in the quotes above); a precedent was established that one night in February when the citizens of the town turned out to pay their respects to a local aircrew. Back then, the connection between the town and those airmen who had lost their lives in Iraq was evident: they were part of the same community. Previously, in Chapter 3, I have illustrated the close links between RAF service personnel stationed in Lyneham and the local community in Wootton Bassett. Hence, turning

out and lining the High Street in February 2005 was not ‘extraordinary’, as the Town Clerk highlights, but something people did ‘because it was an RAF Lyneham crew’. Understandably, this bond with the forces brought many people of this town emotionally closer to the issue of the risk of life involved in being a soldier who serves in an armed conflict. Whether in 2005 or later in 2007, for many it was easy to relate to the grief felt by relatives, friends and colleagues – much easier probably as it was for someone who had never had any personal experience with the armed forces let alone known the loss of a loved one in war or otherwise.

Another point in the responses above struck me when I compared them to my observations of normal repatriation days in Wootton Bassett: the importance of an informal information network through which the community communicates. This communication ‘tree’, as Chris described it later, was vital to the dissemination of information and a grassroots-style continuous plebiscite that led the internal negotiation of ritual elements. The final decision-making, however, remained within a small circle of key actors from and around the town council. Chris, himself a several time mayor and long-serving councillor, is clearly one of them and often acted as a spokesperson for the town. On the day of the prototype repatriation in 2005, a BBC reporter he had previously contacted him to find out whether the town was doing anything to show their respects to the nine airmen:

He said: ‘Chris, what’s Wootton Bassett doing to recognise the servicemen being repatriated through Lyneham today?’ I said ‘Well... first thing, we didn’t know they were coming back to Lyneham, we thought they were going to Brize Norton.’ So now they are coming back to Wootton Bassett today at quarter to five. I said: ‘Well I can tell you the British Legion, the Town Mayor and the Town Councillors and people from the town will gather around the War Memorial to pay their respects. Give me half an hour and I will give you some people to interview.’ That was straight after... I said ‘Thanks very much...’ but the phone died and I just hit my mobile phone and rang [name] who was chairman or president of the British Legion then. I rang the town council offices, I rang our Mayor [name] who was also a... chairman, a secretary to the War Memorial Committee, and I rang anybody else who I thought would spread the word well. I got... it was either four or six people for the BBC to interview, and when he rang back, I passed him the contact details on.

Chris was obviously not just well linked within the media and already known as the right person to talk to for such inquiries; he was also someone who had access to a key level of organisational activity within the town and those who represented it. Within minutes, an ad-hoc response was assembled, which is only possible with the right connections and the right social capital within a community.

Now that these two participants have already identified (directly or indirectly) the importance of several factors that played an important role in making it all possible, they also put an important emphasis on the War Memorial as a focal point and the High Street as the obvious place to gather. In Chapter 3, I have already outlined the importance and history of the Memorial and the spatial affordances of the town centre around the old Town Hall and the High Street. Chris even asks: ‘Would we have had repatriations if we didn’t have a war memorial to be a focal point?’ When talking to Johnathan about the memorial and its prominent placement in the town centre on a wide paved area, he emphasised ‘That’s where it should be! It’s the place to march past for a parade.’ The High Street for him has a special character about it; not only is it wider than usual but it has always been the epicentre of things: ‘I don’t know what it is, it’s something about it that just brings people together.’ This space especially affords this use as it is a wide, paved area situated at the heart of the town and makes reference to its past through the two landmarks: the Memorial and the Town Hall. The War Memorial, erected only a few months before the first prototype repatriation, became the obvious centre of this act of remembrance for the fallen soldiers.

From the very first proto-typical repatriation in 2005 to the incremental addition of elements and consolidation of the ritual between 2007 and 2011, there is a continuous process, which was influenced by a number of contingencies. The above factors can partially explain how it all started because the townspeople of Wootton Bassett seemed to be in the possession of vital tools to deal with a situation like the unexpected arrival of flag-draped hearses. Whilst I am suggesting a possible explanation for this outcome of events here, I also feel the need to caution the reader that this is only one of many possible outcomes. Within Wootton Bassett, the people I talked to were in two minds about this themselves, as the Town Clerk emphasises: ‘I get shouted down when I sometimes say had this gone through any market town in the country it might have happened in the same way. Some people don’t believe that, I am not sure that’s true, I don’t know. I honestly don’t know.’ From these initial contingencies and accidents that got the stone rolling, I will now proceed to analyse the key elements of the ritual.

Death and funerary rites in England

Earlier, I explored the ways in which social practices and above all ritual action are constructed in a dialectical process that draws upon existing frameworks but also allows (and even encourages) for improvisation within these. The development of a ritualised response to the

repatriation cortèges is an example that allows us to follow this process. Above, we have heard from townspeople that the one-off event in 2005 has served as a template for how people reacted when the local tribute to the repatriation processions became a regular event. The tragic death of local soldiers had been marked with an informal gathering along the High Street and the then brand-new War Memorial. At that occasion, there was no question about how to react because this, in many respects, was a funeral procession like others. To observe a short silence whilst a cortège passes by, to halt any activities and stand still, bow one's head or take one's hat off – are traditional customs in Britain for funeral processions, still respected by many today, above all older people.

The origins of this can be found in the Victorian era. When in the 1870s glass-sided hearses came into fashion, the procession of a full funeral cortège used to include the flower-decked hearse, the mourners, undertakers, bearers, mutes and professional mourners (cf. Litten 1991). This extravagant Victorian-type funeral custom declined over the years; above all during and after the First World War, mourning rituals started to become simplified and less pompous (Jalland 1999; Gorer 1965). What remained, however, was the custom to accompany the hearse often from the home of the deceased to the church and then to the graveside. Over the past century, fewer deaths occurred at home and it became more and more unusual to keep the body at home until the funeral (Jupp and Walter 1999). Today, funeral homes commonly take the bodies into their care directly after the person has passed away and a funeral cortège therefore only covers the distance between the funeral home and the cemetery or crematorium if the family wishes so.

The importance of the full funeral cortège in contemporary uses may have declined significantly but the glass-sided hearses with coffins covered in wreaths and flowers are still a basic element of funeral ceremonies in Britain. Many people, above all older people, still expect that when a funeral procession passes by, an appropriate reaction is to show respect in silence. The extraordinary thing about the repatriation cortèges passing through Wootton Bassett after April 2007 is that townspeople did not just show their respects because they happened to be in the town centre when they came through. An ever-growing group of people made the specific effort to wait for the cortège (often for hours) and to gather in the town centre to mark its journey. It is easily forgotten that in the early days of the repatriations, the cavalcade only drove through the centre without stopping. Traffic flowed as usual and what these initial groups of people turned out and lined the streets for was an event that did not last any longer than a blink of an eye.

Those who were able to and did turn out relentlessly in those early days in Wootton Bassett in 2007 were mainly retired local residents (because they had the time) and the veterans from the local branch of the British Legion. For them, the most obvious way to commemorate the fallen was to use the cultural repertoires they knew from funeral rites and remembrance practices. Yet, the repetitive and extraordinary effort shown by these locals forged these known customs into something *new* and in many ways *different*. In the following I will show how the ritual evolved gradually in a process of bricolage using known cultural repertoires and improvising within given opportunities and constraints in this small community.

Paying their respects and silence: the beginnings of the communal experience

To pay one's respects to someone who has passed away and express condolences to the relatives is customary in Britain in the case of death. This has traditionally been done in person, in writing, by attending a funeral service, during a wake or in Jewish communities during *shiva*. When the repatriations started to go through Wootton Bassett, those who showed up at first by the roadside explained their presence saying that they wanted to 'pay their respects' and 'honour' the soldiers that had died. As one participant explained to me, honouring these customs inspired the initial response to the hearses. She called it 'mourning the old-fashioned way':

Aline: What is 'mourning the old-fashioned way'?

Anne: Long ago, years ago, you would find that people would, if they saw a hearse go by, they would stop, you know, take their hat off and bow their head and it would be silent until the hearse is way out of sight.

The way the crowds on the High Street observed a silence during the repatriation ritual and paid their respects standing upright or to attention has been inspired by the behaviour of those who started the regular tributes: elderly veterans of the British Legion and civic representatives – those who still knew how to mourn 'the old-fashioned way'. The only variation from this occurred occasionally later on when the (younger) families and friends of the deceased started to join the crowds. The difference in age seemed to have an effect on the ways people chose to mourn publicly, as the same participant continues to explain:

But you see, these days, it's a different matter, a different way. So you have got some of the older generation who like that old-fashioned way, you stand and, you know, in silence bow your head. And you have got the younger generation who probably would sort of clap and that sort of thing. So you have got a different.... a whole different aspect of today's way of doing things and, well, yesteryear's way of doing things.

During some repatriations, the crowd started clapping as the hearses went by and for many of my interviewees from Wootton Bassett this was perceived as a breach of unspoken rules of the ritual, as somewhat inappropriate. Further on in this chapter, this interesting point will be examined in greater detail. At this point, however, I would like to look closer at the cultural repertoires that were used during those first tributes in early 2007.

Jan, a local resident in her late sixties who had moved to Wootton Bassett that year, remembers the beginnings:

You have heard the term 'old comrades', right? The Old Contemptibles, which is the British Legion... It was started by them and of course, you know, many of them have been involved in the forces for a long time and they want to honour and... because you know there is the Union Flag and... and that's as you well know how it started.

And then it was sort of like... Do you know what I mean by Chinese whispers? When somebody says one thing 'oh really', 'oh yes' and then they contacted Lyneham and then they found out because they wanted to show respect. And like Chinese whispers they told this person, the town council and the people in the shops, the shop owners... and then it evolved. And then 'Oh, you know, why are people standing along the street' 'Oh, you know, there's a repatriation' and those people have stood there. And you know, to begin with, the bell didn't toll, which adds even more emotion to it all. And of course the... initially, the hearses didn't stop, nor did they go at pace, you know, the pacing, they didn't do that.

Reflecting on these memories, she tries to make sense of what had happened and find an explanation. She highlights the link between the residents and the armed forces but also wonders about the effect of having flag-draped coffins in plain view.

But I think it's because of the closeness, which goes almost full circle, that this town has with the armed forces and how they would have... The fact that there are hearses, the fact that they had got the Union Flag on... If they had been transported by different means, it probably would never ever have happened. What happened when they brought, perhaps from the Bosnian War... did they come back this way? Can you see what I am saying? You know... this is all so... I don't know how, why, whether they came back in a different way.

I mean it was so obvious, so open... you don't... you see a hearse of a member of the public. You may see a hearse because it's going to the chapel of rest or wherever, or you may see it with nothing on it or you may see it with wreaths on it. You don't very often, you can't in fact, I don't think, I think there is some... that you'd have to be serving your country to have the Union Flag on, I'm not sure but I think so. So because the hearses are glass-sided, it's gonna make people stop and look.

Jan describes how these first reactions to the hearses used to be mainly a tribute led by the British Legion. To no surprise for anyone since the Legion's main role as a charitable organisation is to organise war commemoration events nationwide. After a while, however, as

this unexpected sight of the flag-shrouded coffins became more common, more and more people stopped and joined the veterans' tribute by imitating their behaviour to a certain degree: the crowd fell silent for a few minutes and people stood still in a respectful manner. Women, men and children straightened up, turned to face the hearses and then either looked straight ahead or bowed their heads. Some folded their hands in silent prayer; others with a military background stood to attention and saluted quietly. Any deviation from this was noticed and sometimes even corrected with a quick hushing sound or irritated looks from bystanders.

Regular participants and retired local residents Ken and Ingrid explained to me what they thought the unspoken etiquette was during the ritual:

Ingrid: I think the posture is: you have to step towards the main road and stand straight.

Ken: Yeah, yeah... you have to stand up, you can't lounge around, that's true! I have never registered it really but I think it would irritate me if it had been going on and I haven't been irritated.

Ingrid: It would be disrespectful... it would be oafish...

When I asked them how they knew how to react in this situation, Ken made reference to his military training and how it influenced his decision:

Ken: Well I, I mean, I had military training so I know what you are supposed to do, you know, when something solemn like that happens. And I used to do that initially. So hands by your side, staring into the middle distance, not looking at any detail in the cortège at all... but really because there was so much of that going around me that it suddenly seemed the right thing to do, although, you know, I haven't been in the military for so long.

Ingrid: So what do you do when the hearse goes by?

Aline: Do you salute as well?

Ken: No. You can't salute...

Ingrid: ...unless you're in uniform, you have to be in uniform.

Ken: In England, in the British Army.

...//...

Aline: But you are not a member of the British Legion.

Ken: No. No... I am not military at all and I haven't been for a long, long, long time but I know instinctively what to do. And that's what I was doing, I found myself doing it [chuckles] because it was catching, because I was seeing so many other proper military people doing it. But I have relaxed since then; I don't do that anymore. I just generally

come respectively to attention, loosely, you know, not like this [he stiffens], very loosely and just look at things a little bit more.

Ingrid: If you had a hat on, you would take your hat off.

Ken: I'd take my... if I was wearing a hat I would remove that. But that's not military, that's just... just common civility.

These specific ways of standing still in absolute silence are known from different situations during which respect is paid to a higher authority or to certain individuals. It reminds us of war commemoration practices, where people gather around a local war memorial to lay wreaths and remember the fallen with a minute's silence. Having grown up in a Catholic village, my immediate association was with the controlled physical movements during church service. During Mass, the congregation is repeatedly asked to stand up, sit down or kneel down at specific times and are generally meant to refrain from talking or fidgeting around. In these and many other situations, silence and upright postures are signs of respect, for taking the situation seriously and focusing on something without distraction. It is about taking a short break from the bustle of everyday life for something that transcends the ordinary, that is sacred. I understand that both for the crowd to gather around the War Memorial in the central square and to behave in such a way must have felt perfectly familiar and obvious for the individuals who started off the ritual and also understood by those who joined later. Either element belongs to a local cultural repertoire, which is easily accessible to members of the society and rehearsed in many different situations throughout the year, be it on Remembrance Sunday, during religious services, military ceremonies or funerals.

The silence and the respectful posture have an additional effect to which David Cannadine (1981) alerts us in his observations about Armistice Day silences: 'it [the silence] made public and corporate those unassuageable feelings of grief and sorrow which otherwise must remain forever private and individual' (p. 222). I dare not to go as far as he does with his claim about individuals' experience of grief but Cannadine observed one vital aspect: when a crowd of several hundred people all fall silent and stop moving as if they were frozen to the spot, it creates an impressive atmosphere. During the repatriation rituals I observed in 2010 and 2011, one could hear a pin drop. The frozen crowd exacerbated the experience of the ritual making it 'corporeal' or bodily, as if a multitude of individual particles suddenly all merged into collective harmony. Any noise or disturbance would have drawn immediate attention to itself because after all, the only moving and noise-emitting items were now the hearse, the funeral director walking

in front of the cortège and the mourners who laid their flowers on the cars. These basic elements of the ritual created the possibility of a collective experience for individual participants. For these brief moments, the crowd had the opportunity to experience shared values attached to their collective behaviour through embodiment.

This respectful silence was the defining element of the initial tribute in 2007. Incrementally, additional elements were introduced in the process of ritual making. The most crucial point in the ritualisation process was perhaps reached when the repatriation cortège began to stop in the town centre. As a consequence of this, the previously loosely defined tribute did not only gain a spatial focus. More importantly, it now had a distinct start, middle and end – a ritual time was created.

The cortège stops by the War Memorial: myth of origin and ritual time

During the first few months, the hearses did not stop at the War Memorial but slowly drove down the High Street past the crowds gathered around the memorial. Locals tell the story that, one day, due to unforeseen circumstances, the cortège had to stop for a few minutes almost on level with the Memorial.

Mary: One of the policemen says... well, you get... everyone says different things about how it started. One of the policemen was telling me the other day that he had to escort some of the soldiers from Iraq from Lyneham. And he said that he was driving through the town and there was a digger...

Chris: A skip lorry...

Mary: A skip lorry, yeah that's right. ...//... And he had to stop and he thinks because he stopped, everybody else stood and watched what he was doing and realised what was happening and... so they saw the coffins come through.

Aline: So the policeman was in front of the cortège? And he had to stop?

Mary: Yes, the cortège. And he thought he couldn't get by them so he would wait.

Audrey: That was... when was it... that was afterwards. Not for the nine [in February 2005]. ...//... It was one of the first ones.

But Chris, Mary and Audrey were not the only ones who told me about this policeman's story of the skip lorry. In fact, it was repeated to me several times almost with a sense of pride about the spontaneity and natural way in which these events unfolded. Simultaneously, participants also

emphasised that there must be many different stories about how it all began or how and why this ritual kept evolving until it reached a point of relative stability. It is interesting, however, that although the possible existence of alternative stories has been mentioned to me, only this story of the skip lorry was ever told. Here is another account of the same events, this time told by the Town Clerk:

And that part of the story is quite... again I think is one of the things that fascinates me... you would have interviewed lots of people, I am sure, each of whom may give you a different viewpoint as to how it started. I don't think... and they are probably very different as well, that you have heard. I don't think people are lying to you or trying to tell the untruth. I think that everybody has come to this in their own good time and in their own way and have their own recollection of it. The whole point of that is that it's been repeatedly said on the press that it happened in a spontaneous manner, it was, it grew organically. And I think that's absolutely true. What happened was that different people found out about it at different times. I know that the MoD policeman tells a tale about the fact that he was riding convoy and there was a skip in the road and it caused the car to stop. And then people realise there is a hearse there and so they stopped and paid their respects. And this is his story.

The tale about the policeman and the skip lorry started to become part of the myth of origin that came with the repetitions of the ritual and its growing popularity. If I wanted to trace the full extent of the events described, however, it would be problematic because my interviewees did not agree as to whether the skip lorry caused passers-by to stop or whether it was when the hearses began to stop regularly in the town centre, probably both. Thinking about possible explanations, one can only assume that an MoD convoy – whose only purpose was to transport bodies to their post-mortem examination in a medical facility 50 miles away – would not just stop for a few minutes in the middle of the busiest road in a town centre because once, they had to stop and a few people had gathered around. In fact, in several other places on this 50-mile journey, people regularly gathered at lay-bys or memorials but the convoy never stopped anywhere else than in Wootton Bassett.

And this is part of the story that no one told me: the skip lorry was perhaps a first coincidence, a contingent event, unexpected as such, that triggered several other reactions. But the most intriguing part of the story is what happened *after* the day the skip lorry had caused the convoy to stop. Since this was the point when key actors and eye witnesses must have discussed the event and finally had the pull and authority to ask the authorities of the MoD convoy to repeat the stops. The omission of this detail of the story demonstrates that simultaneously with the ritualisation of *practices*, there was a myth-making process that accompanied, explained and

framed the action by remembering certain details and forgetting others. More important than retracing the initial coincidences, however, is the effect they produced for the ritual.

The funeral director's role and the 'paging away'

When the stop of the cortège was fully integrated into the ritual, it contained several elements: first, the convoy stopped just before it reached the Town Hall. A funeral director in full livery, a top hat and a walking stick stepped out of the first hearse and then continued to walk slowly and solemnly in front of the cortège (also referred to as 'paging away' within the profession of funeral directing) to level with the War Memorial. The hearses followed him or her slowly and came to a stop again by the Memorial. After the families had said their goodbyes and placed flowers on the hearses, the funeral director got back into the car and the cortège drove off.

As mentioned briefly earlier, this break in the journey of the hearses had no functional value for the MoD or the contracted funeral service provider. Rather, it cut the journey up and gave this small transitional phase, this 200 meter-long stretch on the High Street of Wootton Bassett a special meaning, one that was not part of everyday life pragmatics. The paging in front of the cortège is traditionally practiced at different points during funeral ceremonies: when a hearse first moves, when it arrives at the cemetery or crematorium or, and this is the important one, when it passes a place of specific importance to the deceased. Here, again, we can observe how an element of a known cultural repertoire was integrated into the ritual that started to grow into a mosaic of funereal, military, religious and popular elements.

In ritual theory-speak, what was created here with the stopping of the hearses and the paging was a separation of the sacred from the profane, of ritual-time from everyday life. The stop in the town centre gave birth to the ritual *per se* because it gave it a start (when the funeral director steps out of the car and starts paging) and an end (when the cortège drives off)¹. But as mentioned earlier in Jan's account of the beginning of the tribute: because the hearses were glass-sided, because the coffins were covered in the Union Jack and it was so open, 'it's gonna make people stop and look!' and stopping in the town centre only exacerbated this visual effect. Additionally, the stopping had mapped out a ritual space as well, and placed a clear focus on the War Memorial and the town square (both of which afforded their use as such, as explained in

¹ Arguably, and I have mentioned that in the past chapter, there was a phase both at the beginning and the end where the hearses approached or distanced themselves from the centre that can be seen as part of the ritual itself or separate from it.

Chapter 3). The funeral director, on the other hand, turned into a marshall of grief, a master of ceremony who directed the rite silently by commanding its pace and duration. Step by step, more elements joined these simple beginnings.

The tenor bell: symbolism, values and negotiations

The Tolling Bell

In Wootton Bassett – tolling bell
Rings out so clear as if to tell
The World – another soldier laid to rest
Once described – “outstanding best”.

It is the sound which sadly brings
Transport plane – thus homeward wings
To Lyneham base – familiar shapes
A Union Jack each coffin drapes.

Let us pause in deep respect
Bow down our heads and genuflect
To men now carved on battle roll
For them this bell will always toll.

(Steve Glason 31/03/2010)

The tenor bell is the lowest bell in the church tower of St. Bartholomew’s church in Wootton Bassett and is still rung by a person rather than mechanically. Bell ringing is an activity still performed in many British parishes by a group of people who meet up regularly to practise certain ‘tunes’ together, tolling the different bells in a church in a particular order. When bell ringing practice in Wootton Bassett once coincided with a repatriation, a spontaneous decision was taken to stop the rehearsal and only ring the tenor bell as the hearses passed:

Chris: ...//... That’s another accident that happened.

Aline: Oh I heard about that, yes. How was it? They were just practising?

Chris: They were practising when the...

Audrey: Yeah, on a Monday evening...

Chris: ... as a repatriation came through. They have had to decide whether to ring the bells normally. So they decided just to toll the tenor bell. And um... it was said that was very much appreciated, really put a nice sombre touch to it and it has been done ever since.

Since this coincidence, the tenor bell continued to be tolled every time a repatriation cortège drove through Wootton Bassett. The sound of the bell was a sign for the crowd in the town centre to fall silent and brace themselves for the arrival of the hearses.

Ingrid: And sometimes you know when the policeman goes past, he will say ‘How long is it going to be?’ and he said ‘They’ve left Lyncham now’ so that you know maybe in quarter of an hour, they will be here. But then when it happens, yeah, so the bell starts tolling, it’s quite moving... because it hasn’t always done that. At first of course... this has sort of all evolved, hasn’t it?

Ken: It has evolved, hm. Yeah.

The tolling tenor bell created a sombre soundscape that broke the silence in the town centre and accompanied the entire journey of the hearses; from their arrival in the High Street to the stop beside the War Memorial up to the point when they had reached the roundabout at the end of the street and drove off. In the example of the last repatriation (cf. Chapter 4), this period extended over 11 minutes.

Just like the story with the skip lorry, here we have again an unexpected and contingent event that led to the introduction of another element to the ritual. Other participants’ stories about the bell give us more clues about how this new element to the ritual emerged exactly. What is interesting here is how the situation was negotiated between local actors:

Johnathan: You see what’s interesting... Ah the bells, I know the story of the bell, the bell is easy. There was a repatriation coming through on a Monday evening and Monday evening is bell practice. And so the bell ringers were there and suddenly somebody realised that there’s repatriations coming through and they were practising ringing the bells for a wedding at the weekend or whatever it was. And so somebody ran into the church and said: ‘There is a repatriation coming through, do you mind just not ringing the bells for the next few minutes whilst it goes through?’

On a normal Monday evening, the practice would have simply gone ahead. But on this specific day, someone who was standing on the High Street in anticipation of the repatriation cortège, most likely waiting there with other townspeople, must have deemed it inappropriate that the church bells were rung. Practising for a wedding or a high holiday in the Christian calendar, one can expect the tunes to have been complex and uplifting, celebratory even. For those who stood outside the church, I can only assume and deduct from the accounts above, this didn’t feel right. Until then, the repatriation ritual had been a very simple gathering of people by the roadside, who showed their respects to the passing hearses bowing their heads in silence. Silence and stillness, as we have noted already above, are powerful amplifiers for performative acts as they

reduce any possible distraction and thus focus the attention on a central act. A cacophony of church bells would have disturbed this moment of solemn silence.

What follows now is the interesting bit. Instead of just pausing the practice for the duration of the repatriation, this small group of people in the bell tower took an ad-hoc decision.

Johnathan continues: ...and the bell team there was saying 'Yeah, of course that's absolutely fine' and there was obviously someone who said 'How would it be if I just tolled the tenor bell whilst it happened?'

First, they recognised together that they needed to address this and that it felt inappropriate to continue the practice. Showing cultural competence, this small group of bell ringers¹ tapped into their own experiences of similar events and worked on a possible solution of this situation, which, to date, was unprecedented. There was no routine answer that combined bell ringing and the passing of a repatriation cortège. The choice was open to either not do anything and pausing everyday activities or to improvise. Owning the situation, these specific actors chose to improvise. The question that remains is what the bell ringers based this specific act of improvisation on: Why only one bell? Why the tenor bell, the lowest in the church's register? Why in a slow manner, with an estimated 15-18 regular beats per minute?

As to the last question, I can only speculate that the physical act of tolling the heaviest bell for a prolonged period of time must have placed natural constraints on the way this could have been executed. The slow and regular tolling, however, created a very special atmosphere in the town centre, which was exacerbated by the calming and solemn sound of the lowest bell. This particular pitch of the bell carried the sound not only to the people already on the High Street but reached far beyond, beckoning townsfolk from all over.

Ingrid: And then if we are at home – you know we don't make a religion of it – but if we're at home, we tend to go and say 'tomorrow at quarter past five? Right we'll go'. And obviously, it is not always at that time, you stand about for some time. But sometimes it is actually at that time and then you can hear the bells go tolling but we can hear it fortunately here and we just run, we don't lock the door, we just run to the end of the road and just see it happening then because we don't intend to be right in the middle of it. We don't need that.

Are these church bells 'speaking' to the community? From my own childhood, I remember the importance of the church bells in our small village in Southern Germany. Growing up, I learned that our bells not only announced the time but, depending on the tune, I was able to distinguish

¹ The bell ringers included some of the town's key actors known from other positions, e.g. as mayors or town councillors.

a small number of coded messages addressed to the villagers. The bells called churchgoers to prayer and mass; they rang to mark the moment the Catholic priest celebrated transubstantiation in the Eucharist; announced weddings, deaths and even the approach of heavy thunderstorms in summer to warn those who worked out in the fields. For merely practical, secular means or accompanying Christian rituals – church bells have certainly played an important role in the past in countries like Germany or Britain. Today, remnants of these uses can still be found but the importance of church bells has noticeably declined with the growth of towns and increasingly (religiously) diverse communities.

A more specific cultural-historic background to bell ringing can be found when we examine the role of bells during funerals. Litten (1991) in *The English Way of Death* describes the evolution of common funeral rituals since 1450. Here is one account about a fictitious mid-sixteenth century English village:

It is early autumn; the last few stragglers hurry along the main street to join their friends at the lich-gate as the single bell sounds out its hollow knell. Some tiling the fields on the outskirts of the village stop work for a while, just long enough to offer up a silent prayer for the soul of the departed, perhaps making the sign of the cross as they had been taught to do in childhood, for old habits die hard in such remote areas. Others continue working, the distant bell reminding them of their mortality and eventual end. Meanwhile, the cowed cortège wends its way through the village, its approach heralded by the clerk ringing a handbell. (1991: 146).

At that time, according to Litten, bell ringing worked in two ways: to announce a particular death and solicit an appropriate reaction from bystanders, as well as being a *memento mori*, a reminder of the inevitability of death common in Christian symbolism.

A retired couple from Wootton Bassett also used the symbol of the death bell in their story about how they experienced a typical repatriation day:

Ingrid: ... But then the next thing is when the bells are tolling, they're not quite in Wootton Bassett but sort of coming up the hill here, past Beaman's Lane, bells are tolling...

Ken: Bells? ...bell!

Ingrid: The bell!

Ken: There's only one bell, the death bell, they are ringing the death bell.

The symbolic association of bells with funeral rites and the theme of death has been documented by other anthropologists, too. Metcalf and Huntington (1991: 66-68), for example, discuss how

in the past efforts have been made to connect percussive elements in rituals with the theme of transition (cf. Needham 1967), noise with supernatural power (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1969) or drums with death (cf. Dworakowska 1938). Whether these authors' individual interpretations were valid or indeed useful does not matter here as much as the insight that they all agree on simple effects of bell ringing (or percussion more generally) during rituals: their sound is loud, noisy, attention seeking and mood-setting. Furthermore, bells have been used in connection with funerals and the announcement of death in the past and often still are today. And last, encoded messages and announcements delivered through this medium can range from quite elaborate and only accessible to few 'in the know' to information conveyed by evoking universal emotional responses.

Earlier, I asked what the bell ringers in Wootton Bassett could have based their improvisational act upon. Although an exhaustive answer to this question is impossible, we can see that improvisation (knowingly and unknowingly) makes reference to already existing cultural repertoires. As Jenkins (2004: 70) explains: 'Improvisation can, however, be reflexive, resembling rational calculation, or spontaneously unreflexive, in which case it looks more like habit. Improvisation may also pay attention to rules and conventions in the ad hocery of the moment.' In the process of improvisation, known cultural repertoires and symbolic frameworks are one side of the story of how we create a shared sense of continuity. In this 'ad hocery of the moment', a more complex set of factors play an important role in the negotiation of the improvised response and its acceptance or refusal.

Johnathan continues: ... And because of that there [the coincidence of bell ringing practice and a repatriation], it happened on the night and of course tolling the tenor bell *set the tone* for what was to come really. And there afterwards it was then 'Well, couldn't we have that done that every time?'

Aline: Who would ask that?

Johnathan: Well... [long pause] you see, it's a sort of thing... there would be a collective acceptance... of 'Oh, that worked really well!'. And then everybody would say we should do that next time. And it wasn't any one person, I don't think. It just... happens. Yeah, there is this *collective will*, if you like, of people saying that worked, that was really good, that made it really... that should happen every time. (Emphases added)

The speaker emphasises the collaborative nature of this process. Elements of the repatriation ritual did not just appear out of thin air, they were improvised in reference to existing ideas of 'tone' and after their initial introduction they were negotiated within the community and within groups of key actors. As a small community, most of this decision-making and feedback process happened informally. These aspects will be explored later on in this chapter and the next.

Families and friends move into focus

Early 2007, the tribute was a local one, led and attended mostly by members of the British Legion, a few bystanders and individuals with an official, civic or religious role in the town such as the Mayor, Councillors, the Vicar, or the Town Crier, for example. The families and friends of the soldiers only joined the ritual in the town centre after the town's tribute had started to become more famous and had been in the news on a regular basis. By mid-2008, roughly a year on, the ritual was fully established and visitors, families and the media had started to join the ranks of local residents. Over this first year, the profile of the repatriation ritual had been rising incessantly and the local tribute was officially recognised with awards honouring local organisations and individuals for their efforts. But the floods of fan post and articles in overseas newspapers were only the beginning of what was to come at the height of the hype in 2009 and 2010.

In this first year there was a clear evolution from a local tribute to a fully elaborated ritual that included visitors, the family and those who watched from far. A limited number of close family members have always been invited by the MoD for a military repatriation ceremony performed at the RAF airbase. But only after some time did some family members start to turn up for the Wootton Bassett ritual as well. This then developed to a degree where in mid-2010 it was taken for granted that the family members who went to the airbase first would then receive special transport to the town centre of Wootton Bassett to take part in the ritual from their very own designated space between the Memorial and the road (see Chapters 3 and 4 for details on space and the groups). Anne, the Secretary and Repatriation Officer of the Wootton Bassett Royal British Legion, attempts to explain the beginnings:

I have had contact with quite a few of the families and I am actually corresponding with this family who lost their son or their grandson in 2007. He was in Iraq and she wrote actually that they couldn't actually get here at that time. And it was just the time when a lot of families were starting, because when we first done it, families didn't come to the repatriations here in Wootton Bassett. But later on, it started that some came because they couldn't get on to Lynham and they had nowhere else to come so they came to Wootton Bassett. And now it has become quite a thing for them to come.

The local newspaper the *Swindon Advertiser* reported the first attendance of the repatriation ritual by one of the families on 27 September 2007 with the title 'Town suffers grief of Army families'. In this article, Anne was quoted describing the event:

This was the first time we had one of the families here. This was by far the most emotional because of that. They seemed to know which coffin was theirs. It is like time stands still when they come past. It has become very overwhelming. I think there has been two weeks since April where we haven't had a repatriation.

Slowly but steadily, the local tribute that had as a focus a more general theme of war commemoration started to turn into something more personal. The growing presence of the families and friends brought feelings of personal loss and grief into the mix, which drew more and more attention to the fallen soldiers as individuals, away from the anonymity of the non-distinct flag-draped coffins. With the public eye increasingly pointed on the repatriations and the families present in the midst of the ritual, there was a transition noticeable from a simple local tribute to a service done for someone else, i.e. to show respect to the families and give them support in their grief. Anne told me the story of a father whose daughter was killed in Afghanistan in July 2008 and who by chance joined the town's tribute after he had been to the military ceremony in Lyneham. He got in contact with Anne in her role as the British Legion's Repatriation Officer to thank her for their support and to share his emotions:

... he said then that at that time it wasn't the norm for families to come here, to Wootton Bassett. And it wasn't until he was... in the taxi, on his way back to the hotel, that he suddenly thought: 'What's all the crowds for? Was there an accident?' And he said to the taxi driver: 'What's going on?' And he said: 'Oh, it's the repatriation. They're lining the streets and they pay tribute to those that are being repatriated.' And he said 'Right, stop!', stopped, got out of the taxi, and came up and just about made it into the market square. And he was, he said he was overwhelmed with the way things have gone. And he said he was so pleased that he could be there at that time to see that and to see that other people shared his grief with him.

The involvement of the families also meant that many more people got personally in touch with the town council or the British Legion to tell them their story, share their grief and emotions and thank them for their effort in cards, letters and emails. The usually private side of feelings of mourning and loss became suddenly more tangible and public for those who attended the rituals in Wootton Bassett.

For another participant, the presence of the families and friends of the deceased had a grave emotional impact on the crowd and created what she called a 'ripple effect':

... And it made it more real in a way, you could... that there were the relatives, you could see their grief, you could hear their grief, um... and you sort of got drawn into this... to their grief, I suppose, really, ... and the realisation that, you know... and so many of them, um... were so young, I think, you know. They were 18, 19 years, I think the youngest, I think was 17. I think, I'm not sure. And I think you were drawn in to their grief so therefore it touched you and you became involved. It's very difficult to explain how this... and it's a bit like um... like... when there is a reaction between

people, you get a lot of people together. Um... you know more about this than me and their feelings... and it's like a ripple effect, their feelings can affect your feelings. And that's the only way I can explain it.

The amount of letters and thank you cards the town started to receive from families and others helped raise the profile of the repatriations locally and in the media. In early 2008, the town council exhibited some of them on a temporary memorial wall. Councillor Chris who helped set up the memorial with his wife Audrey, the town's mayor, emphasised the growing importance of showing support to the families that attended the ritual:

We wanted to make sure that the people of Wootton Bassett could see just how much comfort they have provided as a community to the families of those who died. We have had quite a number of letters thanking the town and its police for their compassion during the repatriation of their son, daughter or colleague. It's something the townspeople should be proud of – that we have shown our respect and support for our service personnel who pay the ultimate price. (SA 21/02/2008)

By June 2008, the presence of the families had turned into a motivating factor to attend the repatriation in great numbers to show support for those in grief. The local newspaper printed a plea for people to turn out and pay their respects for a repatriation that was planned for 7.30pm, an unusually late time: '...there are worries that people will not be out on the streets to pay their respects' (SA 02/06/2008). A local shop owner and member of the British Legion explained that 'It is obviously concerning that as shops will not be open at this time our repatriated soldier will not be getting the respectful treatment our services have come to expect since April 2007' (SA 02/06/2008). Together with the growing profile of the ritual seems to come a feeling of responsibility to keep up the effort and maintain it to a high standard for the families' sake. By mid-2008, the spontaneous, improvised and 'organically-grown' tributes had already become normalised to a certain degree, 'expected' as the person above described it.

The Town Clerk had observed the different mayors' approaches to their own roles as representatives of the town during the ceremony. When we talked about the gradual development and changes over time, he noticed how the central focus of the ritual gradually moved to the families:

In terms of organisation, the one thing we were always clear about, right from the start, was that the mayor of the town wouldn't necessarily be right at the front. If you look at the... it's interesting this: if you look at the film of the 2007 repatriation with chairman Percy Miles, you will see him right at the front by the war memorial with his chain on. But at that repatriation that they were televising, there were perhaps only a dozen or so people there. It wasn't a lot of people, maybe a few more, but it wasn't a huge number, right? But it wouldn't have contained at the time, members of the family.

Because when it started, it was simply local people turning out to pay their respects. It wasn't members of the family or colleagues of the fallen coming to the town; it was just the townspeople, so the Mayor stood at the front. As it grew and as, I remember this from Audrey Wannell's time as a mayor, as it grew and more people came, the one thing that became clear is that we didn't necessarily want the Mayor at the front. It should be the families at the front.

And so the Mayor consciously took a step back and... I know Audrey Wannell did that, and then Mike Leighfield did that, Steve Bucknell did that, and actually when it came to Mary Champion, she used to walk way down to the end, deliberately. I mean she would greet the family. Then when the hearse was coming, she would walk away and go down by the Town Hall. So that she was never intruding, that was the thing. It was about to try and help, support and care but never to intrude. And I take my hats off to every one of them mayors because somehow they have all individually managed to find words to try and offer comfort to the families.

The importance of the presence of the families and friends during later repatriation rituals is not only based on the added emotional effect it had and the growing centrality of personal feelings of grief and loss. More importantly, as I have already alluded to above, the focus of the ritual moved from a local tribute to a ceremony in support of the families. Above, the Town Clerk explained how the mayors gradually took a step back from the centre point of the ritual and how the families symbolically replaced the town's representatives. The participants of the ritual now seemed to envelop the families and friends in their midst, whilst performing the ritual around them. The local participants were those who attended regularly and repeatedly, those in charge of performing the routine elements of the ritual. Visitors, however, had their own space within this ritual organisation, left to them to fill as they pleased. This means that, whereas locals set the framework and tone of the ritual, attending families and friends of the deceased now held the prerogative over certain individual elements that were allowed to 'bumble' within this framework.

Yeah, actually... it's... it's something going on underneath this, which is about the warmth and the caring and the fact that there is a tolerance there. But it doesn't matter about the fact that it's a bit bumbley and that... because actually it's sort of getting it done. It's part of the charm of it, you know, and you sort of come... Then I have had some conversations with Thomas Woodhouse, and Thomas has always said to me... ...//... He said 'It's about setting a framework right.' ...//...

If you know the framework is basically sound, you can bumble away as much as you like inside [laughing] because that's the charm of it. ...//... Because if you know that you have got a strong framework, everything else within it works well. And I thought a lot about that, I think, actually that's what it is about. It's about somewhere on the line, there is a basic structure that is always gonna be right because it is about people caring. Yeah, there are certain things... you were always going to look after the families that came because you need to care for those people because they are in a really horrible place and

none of us wanna be there. And we want to show our sympathy to them, we wanna show our respect to those. So those things are never going to change because that's what's happened, that's what's crucial, important. But the rest of this, actually doesn't matter, the rest of it is sort of unimportant and it does bumble along a bit, you know.

Nevertheless, this new dynamic created different points of friction within the community: One local participant whom I asked who set the informal rules of the ritual and who the ritual 'belonged to' gave some careful thought to the issue:

I suppose it's tempting to say it's ours... um... it has, it's evolved, so the Wootton Bassett contribution has itself changed. But I think the general note through it, throughout the evolution, has been this kind of quiet respectful approach in what we do. Um... and I would think people generally would think this is our... our... 'show', if you like. It's our gesture to the people going through. Don't forget that, initially, there were no families. You know, it's just, it was just a few people locally who were doing it, then a few more people from the locality did it and then the family started coming in. And that side of it grew. Not just family and friends from the deceased, they started coming in. Um... so they... in a way they came in late, after we decided more or less unconsciously or subconsciously how we wanted it to be. So... without treading on any modest toes, I would say, we do tend to think of it as being what we do towards the dead and at the same time leaving space for the families to come and do what they consider appropriate. I mean it's a minefield, isn't it? You would never ever dare criticise what the families and friends are doing.

On the one hand, some locals started to take slight offence on the ways out-of-towners (like the families, friends and colleagues but also the media) started to influence 'their' ritual. One of the issues frequently discussed by my participants from Wootton Bassett was the clapping during the ritual. Many did not seem to like it or found it was inappropriate for such a solemn occasion. Others seemed to have made their peace with it by explaining it as a generational difference in showing respect and grieving. The official narrative about the applause also emphasised the mourners' prerogative to express their grief and feelings freely. As a general bone of contention, the clapping and the different accounts about it seemed to polarise residents and brought other underlying conflicts to the foreground.

This retired couple I spoke to was not involved in the organisation of the ritual but attended the repatriations regularly if they could. I asked them to describe a typical repatriation day with all the things that usually happened and how people behaved. Our conversation soon moved towards the differences in behaviour between locals and visitors.

Ingrid: Hm hm. Yeah. People meet each other there you know, old neighbours and you have a little chat but it's all very quiet. There isn't, you know, it is not like a joyful crowd. There is quite a crowd and people come then out of their shops and stand quietly and we bow our heads when the hearses come by and people, men, will take their hats off... But

there is also this element of a lot of young people then, mainly friends of the young soldiers who are sort of coming to Wootton Bassett, um...

Ken: Their behaviour is different from ours.

Ingrid: Their behaviour is completely different from ours. As I see, I see them as young boys, my own, my sons, and these young boys, well they're friends, you know... I wouldn't say... well they're obviously... all look sad but they are showing it in a different way by often wearing sort of maybe, the same sort of t-shirts, quite loud, with their names on it and... And what I actually thought, once what happened, there was sort of... he was obviously a rugby player this young man and there were his rugby playing friends about. And they formed a scrum around the hearse, and shouting 'olly, olly, olly' or whatever they shout on the field. And that was actually quite moving I thought, you know. But then there is all this clapping going on which doesn't happen always but sometimes it happens and the people around don't quite know what to do. But some will also clap and I always feel, why is this clapping going on? But you know, is it to say thank you for doing something for this country and great! And we're thanking you...? Is it, you know... I don't know what this clapping is all about, I don't like it. And people, I've spoken to, friends, don't like the clapping.

Aline: Why is that?

Ken: You know... it's inappropriate.

Aline: Why does it not fit?

Ken: Why? I don't think the Wootton Bassetters do it.

Ingrid: It's people coming from abroad, it's their young friends or something...

Ken: It's usually the friends and relations....

Ingrid: It's like clapping in a church or something, it's definitely not appropriate. You know, you're sad! Clapping is something that should be a joyful thing or in a theatre or something like that, thanking the actors but clapping... it's you don't clap at a funeral.

Ken: Well, our local priest, the Catholic priest, doesn't come to the centre of things, because of the clapping he said. He stands, you know the Catholic church is sort of on the way out of Wootton Bassett, and he stands there and says his rosary or something like that because of the clapping. He can't stand the clapping.

Ingrid: We find that quite cheap, it cheapens the whole thing.

Ken: Yeah it does.

After they had expressed their personal dislike of the clapping in the interview, I wondered whether they could relate to the families and friends and to why they would want to clap in this situation. Generational differences again were the reasons given:

Aline: Can you imagine why people would clap there?

Ken: [sighs]

Ingrid: And why people go on, why people think ‘oh...’ when somebody starts clapping... Because I noticed some people in front of us, I said ‘Why are they clapping? Just because they feel some clapping done, we have to follow on?’

Ken: I think it is something to do with the modern culture. People have to be involved with what’s going on; they are not content to sit passively by in what we of the older generation would consider ‘dignified’ silence.

Ingrid: That’s right: dignified.

Ken: They want to... That’s not enough. These are just my unfounded thoughts but I think it’s part of the general culture...

Ingrid: On the news once, they were saying, you know, oh you know, when they were bringing it on the news and he explained it in sort of a nicer way. You have to sort of make it sound alright, but it isn’t alright. I don’t think it’s alright.

At this point in the development of the ritual, a gap started to show between the ideas of most local residents and key actors about what a dignified tribute should be like and on the other hand the younger friends, colleagues and family members of the deceased soldiers. What is important here again are the demographics involved: since most repatriations happened on weekday afternoons, most regular attendants were retired local residents or Legion members with military backgrounds. A cultural difference based on age and personal background in the way these groups mourn publicly is apparent.

The more this ritual developed and grew in dimension, the harder it was for key actors to keep the different elements under a certain control in order to guarantee that the original tone and intent of it was maintained. Officially, the town council and the British Legion only reluctantly admitted to some degree of direct organisation and management of the repatriation. During the interviews and my observations, however, it became clear how above all the local authority (i.e. certain council members and officers) was the invisible hand conducting events (a theme I will explore further in Chapter 6). In the following interview extract, the Town Clerk remembers a discussion amongst key actors about the clapping and other issues:

And there was once when there was lots of concern about the photographers and health and safety and Mike Neville [commander of RAF Lyneham] called a meeting because he was a little worried about some of the things that he was hearing and what was going on. And we all went over to RAF Lyneham and there was... um... there had been some talk about things like clapping, for example.

There had been a case where there had been clapping. And the story I choose to believe is that the BBC were covering a repatriation and there were some children at Lyneham and they had come out of primary school and... a group of kids... and as the hearses came by they didn’t know what to do and they clapped. This is what they did, what kids

do. And those pictures were beamed, by the BBC, back to Wootton Bassett into the pubs here, people saw them and... they can't... And so, um, when the hearses arrived here people were clapping.

Then, after that, there was this sort of almost outrage by some... some parts of the British Legion who were saying why... you should stop the clapping, let's put notices up, no clapping and, you know... this sort of thing.

And actually Steve Bucknell¹, who I vividly remember sitting in this meeting, saying, 'Well hang on a minute, yeah if people feel that they want to pay their respect by clapping who are we to say they can't? Why shouldn't they be allowed to do it if that's what they think is appropriate, then that's what's appropriate.' You know. Why should we strive to stop them?

And I thought there was a piece of civic leadership from him then at that moment, I thought that could have gone all sorts of which way. ...//... But there were moments when it could have gone wobbling off in all sorts of directions and he would step up and just bring everybody back to this sort of... 'No, this is right!'

From this account, we learn that there were regular meetings between stakeholders from the MoD and representatives of the town in which different matters of organisation and other things were discussed. This one was a difficult decision to make: should the town council listen to these individuals from the British Legion who took offence to the clapping, and put notices up? After all, the Legion had started the ritual and had set the tone for this solemn tribute that was modelled after war commemoration practices known since the 1920s. On the other hand, however, the increasing presence of friends and family members of the deceased soldiers that were commemorated there had changed the stakes to some degree; supporting them in their grief and the free expression of their emotions had become paramount to key actors. Consequently, this group of participants were granted special rights within the organisational bubble of the ritual. They had their own space and time during which they were allowed to express themselves as they wanted. Other than that, however, the group of key actors remained in control of leading the events carefully and almost invisibly in the background.

Anne from the British Legion explained this point to me emphasising a lack of organisation and management – another narrative that started to develop around the ritual:

The rest of it is... you know, it's just happened. And I think, to me that is the beauty of it all. It's the fact that it hasn't been organised. It's whatever the families want, really. If the families want to burst into song [laughs], which, you know, you had some nationalities that have wanted to do that... so they do. If they want to clap, they clap. If they want to cheer, they cheer.

¹ Another key actor, former mayor (2009-2010) and town councillor.

We are even, you know... it's up to them, really because everyone grieves in a different way. You have got a lot of young ones coming through and the younger generation today they don't mourn in the old fashioned way. They more or less celebrate life and that... You know, they are paying tribute for what he has done, for giving up his life and that. But they are also saying it's a praise as well.

But for Anne as well, there is an inherent conflict between different generational approaches to showing grief and respect. As earlier quoted, she explained how 'yesteryear's traditions' are different from what younger generations tend to do at funerals.

Aline: What is the, say, the 'traditional' way of doing things? Standing there... bowing the head: what does it represent?

Anne: It's respect, you see? And this is it. I daren't/don't say that the youngsters of today – because they cheer and because they clap – don't respect one.... they are probably saying in their own way... erm... they are saying 'Well done! You have done your duty and you paid the price for doing your duty.' And they are praising him for doing that. Where... you have got the other aspect of people who respect someone by being quiet and bowing your head. So you've got two different generations. You've got the very modern generation and the older generation.

Nowadays, if you go to funerals, they don't say, you know, the sort of... They don't talk so much about the grief and the sadness and that sort of thing. They say it to celebrate life, celebrate the life he has had and not to sort of erm... because... well... Take it, for instance: years ago, the family would probably wear black for quite a length of time. Nowadays, it's different to that. There's a different way of taking, you sort of erm... you will find that some people don't even wear black even for their funerals. It's a different way of mourning. It's not disrespectful, it's saying sort of respects there. It's just people do it in different ways.

When I spoke to Henry Singer, the filmmaker who directed the BBC documentary about Wootton Bassett's repatriations, we compared our experiences of doing research in the town. He seemed to have made similar experiences to me when it comes to the issue of clapping and the question it opened about underlying rules or norms of the ritual and the people who were in charge behind the scenes.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah I think, look, I came across that with the applause, definitely. And I think, you know, by the time I spoke to people, people had probably moderated their views of things like the applause. I think the more enlightened people... I mean, I didn't like applause, maybe because I am over fifty and I think you don't applaud those things. And yet, as people pointed out to me, you know, what matters is the families and if they want to applaud, or the friends... and that's, that's all that matters and there are no rules.

There are different elements that Henry brings up in his reflections: First, he assumes that people have 'moderated their views' to some degree over time when it comes to the clapping. In

a similar way, I was able to observe that although my participants all seemed to personally dislike the applause, some of them were much more careful in expressing their views and judgements. Those in more official roles had developed an narrative ready for public statements, repeated hundreds of times in interviews and the like. Whereas individuals who spoke to me as private persons, were much more likely to confide and share their opinions that may have diverged from the official accounts. And just as one participant noted: 'It's a minefield', this topic – simply because customs dictate that those in grief are to be protected and respected in their emotions and not to be criticised.

The British Legion standards: control and the critical mass

Members of the Royal British Legion are widely seen as the experts on war commemoration practices since, nationwide, they are the organisers of yearly Remembrance Day activities whilst, locally, they are also the keepers of the community's scroll of honour. In Wootton Bassett, the British Legion were involved from the very first repatriation and seen as probably *the* key group for the ritual. Coincidentally, in April 2007 when the first regular repatriation was announced, the then mayor of the town was also an active member of the local branch of the British Legion. He had also been a member of the small group of people that fought for the construction of the War Memorial. The British Legion have been heavily involved in the repatriation ceremonies and other public events ever since. Some of the most poignant elements of the repatriation ritual were performed and devised by the British Legion: the loud verbal commands that officially started and ended the ritual – 'Up!' and 'Dismiss!'. These two commands directed to the standard bearers were the only utterances during the ritual.

At first they signalled members of the British Legion the start and the end of their military salute. Over time, however, everyone else present had also accepted the two commands as the official start and end signals for the silence. The first command 'Up!' marked the moment when the funeral director stepped out of the hearse in the front and started walking slowly and solemnly down the High Street up to the War Memorial, followed by the cortège. The last command '(Standard bearers) Dismiss!' was given when the hearses had reached the end of the High Street, the funeral director got back in the hearse and they drove off. At this point, the ritual had reached its end, the silence was over and the hustle and bustle of the crowd started again with everyone dispersing and disappearing from the High Street so that within five to ten minutes, nothing was left of the few hundreds that had gathered there before.

As the local tribute was becoming more famous, the Royal British Legion started to be represented by more and more standard bearers from branches from all over the country, who travelled to Wootton Bassett to take part and pay their respects as well. The Wootton Bassett branch of the veterans' association had internally agreed not to wear their medals or fly their flag but the visiting organisations now arrived in full regalia. According to the Repatriation Officer of the local branch, another decision had to be taken:

Anne: The British Legion has always said that... it's... Wootton Bassett is like the host town. We've... this is where it's coming through. It's not our day so we are not parading our standards. So we never have our standard there. We never have... the men don't wear their medals either. They are just people of the town who want to... erm.... honour the soldier that's coming through.

Would it be appropriate to allow other branches to wear their badges and fly their standards if the local group has decided not to? Anne continued to explain why they came to accept this new element to the ritual:

Other associations, they like to bring their standard to actually represent all their members. So, there may be the standard bearer coming with his standard. It's not for him alone: he's representing his unit, his branch of that particular organisation. So, you know, we accept those standards. Erm... but we never have ours at all there. We have never done that and we said we never will.

As representatives for a bigger group, that is vicariously for others who would have liked to attend as well but couldn't, those standard bearers then became an essential part of the ritual with their own space opposite the families and the War Memorial. From a handful of local veterans at the very beginning, attendance evolved to a regular number of minimum twenty standard bearers and additional groups of older and younger Legion members, representing their branches with their differently coloured blazers and berets or on their motorbikes (for the British Legion Riders' Branch).

For many visitors, these verbal commands and the visible actions associated with them served as markers and guidelines that brought order into the ritual performance they wanted to participate in. At the point when hundreds of ritual novices joined the small crowd of ritual regulars every time, the ritual could only work as a mass event if participants could pick up the rules very quickly; the simpler and clearer the better to avoid confusion. Although this seems to be a logical development of events in Wootton Bassett, all my interviewees still were very reluctant to admit to this necessary introduction of some sort of order. For them, the beauty of it all appears to have been the spontaneity with which the tribute began and first developed. Any introduction of

rules, orders, telling people what to do was perceived as spoiling it, as a betrayal to the original values on which the ritual was built (this theme will be expanded in the next chapter). I talked to Henry Singer, the BBC filmmaker, at length about this precise aspect. He himself seems to be tempted to maintain this label of simplicity and spontaneity but then admits:

Henry: So... you know, they were, it *looked* spontaneous but they kind of worked it out to a 't' after a while and specific people had specific jobs and they worked it out, they formalised it whereby it... it, I think, was around a simple thing to execute. And that's not a criticism, that's a compliment.

Aline: Aham. Did it maybe get so formalised that it turned out to be quite rigid...?

Henry: I don't think so... //... not in my experience. It always felt... they managed to me to keep it... they kept it um... It felt organic. I mean, it felt informal; it always felt informal. It wasn't... they kept the politicians at bay... they... You know when the press got, in 2009, when the... they felt the press was really intrusive. They had a word with the press and they made sure the press became less intrusive. I think they have always kept the families front and centre and that was the right decision.

And to me, at least in my experience, again, you will have been to many more than me... It never felt too rigid. It couldn't be too rigid. It often was delayed. You know, sometimes they would... the plane arrived late and they would end up waiting there for hours. I mean it... it... there was a degree of uncertainty that sadly was part of that. And so, I think what I always liked about it was it didn't feel rigid and it never felt organised. With all these retired guys you know, telling people when to rise and lower their standards and sometimes they would get it wrong. And that was what I liked about it, it was kind of amateur in spirit.

Aline: But it's interesting that you say sometimes someone would get it wrong. If it's open you can't get anything wrong. So were there rules about it? Norms?

Henry: Well I think there weren't rules but there were norms. I think, um...

Aline: Informal rules...?

Henry: Look, you saw in the film, I can't even remember his name now, I am getting so old I can not remember it... but I think the second, the guy who was in charge of the standards, you know, he would go around and tell people. There were lots of, new people who would come. Some would come week in week out, some of the people who'd come for the first time, he would kind of informally tell them how to do it. You know, is that a rule? No. That's a kind of, this is how we do it and you know we'd appreciate you doing it like us. But it was never... it was never a boot camp you know... was it?

Aline: It was only somebody saying... no negative consequences?

Henry: And so it felt... it was, to me... I think that was nice. I think, you know, they could have had handouts, they could have had all kinds of things.

In the following, Anne from the local British Legion branch went on to explain to me the origin of the commands given to the standard bearers. On the one hand, she thinks that this is a logical evolution of event but at the same time, she attempts to maintain the purity of the ritual by emphasising its grassroots organic nature again and again, even if she contradicts herself.

We just stand there and when the bells tolls, silence descends, as you found out probably by being there, and, you know, everybody falls silent. And the... erm... give the word for the standards to rise their standards ready to dip them... erm... It's actually, that's being done because they... there was a tremendous amount of standards. It started off with one or two but now we get really an awful lot. As many as 50 standards down the road.

And therefore we felt that some control was needed on that score. But generally, there is no control. There is no organisation. You are not told to do this, told to do that. The only thing... the only one is the salute. Because people were not quite sure about the salute, there was hesitance there and they felt that... keeping away from the military orders, the simple word of 'Up!' was sufficient for the salute and the standard bearers. And that's how it has been.

And at the end, people... some hold their salute right to the end and some... actually older people can't, you know, they find it difficult. But once the cars have moved away, it's up to the persons themselves whether they want to bring their hand down or not. And it's only the standards that are told, you know, to... the word 'up', which means they bring the standards back up again after the dip and then the word 'dismiss' and that's basically all there is, you know, to the orders. The rest of it is... you know, it's just happened. ...

Obviously, Anne has difficulties to maintain the myth of the spontaneous and simple tribute but insists on creating a continuous story about the repatriation tributes even if the stakes were constantly changing.

'It's like a tree': informal networks and community

Come rain, snow or hail they gather beside the War Memorial. 'We have been there three times a week at times,' said Bevis [secretary of the Wootton Bassett British Legion branch]. When details are known, she rings round regulars, who pass them on to others. Word spreads. There are rarely fewer than 150, sometimes as many as 500. Veterans, former military personnel, the 'chain gang' as the local mayors and councillors refer to themselves, stand alongside mothers, school children, shoppers.

(The Guardian/The Observer 14/09/2008)

This following section analyses not an element of the ritual per se, rather we are now starting to get a look behind the scenes. Earlier parts have already started to discuss the roles of some key actors in the making of the repatriation ritual. Ritualisation is a process that does not only describe the gradual establishment of certain ritual routines. For this process to be meaningful

and understood, what is needed are actors, participants, and audience and decision-makers. None of the above elements would have come into being had it not been for the previous existence of certain links and networks between actors. Over the course of ritualisation, these may have remained the same, changed or been reinforced in some ways. The human element of the ritual, the emphasis on community, small-town simplicity and grassroots organisation was first a description of the events but soon became the brand mark for the repatriations. And I believe that this sense of community within Wootton Bassett is indeed what held events together, what kept people going. At the beginning, only few people knew about the cortèges passing through town and only few turned up. Soon, however, more and more people became curious and wanted to know more. At this point, people could have left it to the local newspapers or the town council to put up a public notice somewhere. And with the flood of information one deals with every day, these notices could have lost importance over time and with the more familiar sight of the cortèges. But again, coincidences and contingencies were to steer events in a different direction at these crossroads.

The passing of a repatriation cortège through Wootton Bassett was announced to the public in different ways. At first, few were aware of the exact repatriation dates but more and more people started to be interested and new ways of disseminating the information were found, within the community and more widely. A MoD spokesman, for example, noted in 2008 that ‘It’s not an official thing. Word just spreads and people turn out. It is really impressive.’ (SA 18/12/2008). By mid-2010 at the latest – the time I observed my first repatriation ceremony – announcements could be found on the radio, in the local newspaper, on various websites (e.g. provided by the Royal British Legion, Wootton Bassett Town Council, RAF Lyneham), as notes on community announcement boards, in shop windows, or on the information board at the Town Council offices.

Apart from these publicly available media of information, another way of communicating the news had become much more important for local people: i.e. word of mouth. In the case of this small town community, several individuals took on the responsibility of personally notifying a lengthy list of individuals as soon as they had news of another repatriation date. Informal communication networks flourished over time, within which information was passed on to those interested in joining the repatriation ritual or for related reasons. The local papers called this a ‘grapevine [that] has grown stronger, with each new batch of fatalities swelling the turnout from dozens to the hundreds...’ (SA 18/12/2008). Anne, the local British Legion’s Repatriation

Officer, explained how it all worked in an information leaflet sent to anyone who contacted her about the repatriations:

Once the time and date is announced people are contacted and they in turn contact others. I contact approximately 150 by e-mail and another 70 plus by phone. Some people are unable to come to Wootton Bassett so gather together wherever they maybe to pay their own tributes in their own ways. One person likes to be contacted so they can fly the flag at half-mast on the day. [sic]

(British Legion, 2010)

Chris, Audrey and Mary, councillors and former mayors of the town and part of the 'chain gang' of key actors in town were involved in this information effort. They used the following imagery to portray this informal network:

Chris: 2007, when they started coming back, the council has always been informed about the repatriations. The Council have always passed the information out to the councillors. And in April 2007, it just went out to the councillors. So, very few people turned up, because we were the only ones who knew. So, ...

Audrey: Then the British Legion wanted to know...

Chris: The British Legion wanted to know. We used to ring Anne [from the British Legion] up...

Audrey: Yeah, I know we did...

Chris: And ah, then the Council got requests that more people want to know. And so it spread...

Mary: ... Snowball...

Chris: Aude said it's like a... tree, the council being the trunk who receives the initial call. They spread it out to a number of people. We are the branches. And we spread it out to people. I ring seventy-odd people. They spread it to other people. So, we are the branches, they are the twigs, and the people they spread it to are the leaves... they build your tree. And that's how the word spreads. ...//... That's really how it evolved. Because every time people used to come up to me and say 'How do you know about this? Give me a ring!'

When I talked to Anne, the connection within this small group of key people in the town became much clearer. She explained to me how the council and the British Legion were not just closely connected but also intertwined in many respects. After the first regular repatriation in 2007, the local Legion branch called a meeting and discussed how they wanted to proceed in the future.

It started with Percy¹. Percy Miles who is also a British Legion man. That's how, really, both council and British Legion have come to be involved because he was on both sides.

¹ Mayor in 2006/7, town councillor and British Legion member.

He was going both ways. And it was at the first meeting... the first one happened on the 5th of April. We had a meeting on the Monday after that. And erm... as I was back for that meeting, I was secretary at the time, they discussed this and they said, well how are we going to know when this happens? And I said I would volunteer to find out, I said I would go do something about it. So I got into touch with Lyneham and that's when they started getting the information from them about when the repatriations were going to be. So erm... it has sort of gone on that both... it has been both council and British Legion equally sort of all the way along.

Every year in May, a different council member is made mayor of the town. Soon after the start of the repatriations, Audrey, wife to Chris and friends with Anne took over this ceremonial role of head of town.

When it had come to the mayor changeover in May, they changed over to Audrey... Well Audrey and I worked very closely together. We done some of these... We had the post office window, we done the library, we done some... those were our first things together. So some of us put the actual letters... she passed some on to me and I passed some on to her. Audrey and I worked very well together during that whole year, we shared a lot of things...

In a very informal way, Anne, Audrey and others started to share tasks and volunteered to inform the public as well as deal with the thank-you letters they started to receive. Anne indeed emphasises the simplicity of the effort. Yet as simple and straightforward as it may seem to her, it is important to wonder why all these people did volunteer their time and energy again and again. After all, they could have wanted to keep the information within small circles only, for example.

It began as a simple tribute and that's all we have done really. We get the call from Lyneham; we'd tell other people what the date is and what the time is. I inform Margaret across the road in the stamping and framing shop. Now I have actually set up a website as well through the British Legion so that it goes on all those sort of things. And then it's up to the people.

In a downward cascade, the MoD informed RAF Lyneham, which then passed on the information to a few key actors, namely the Town Council and the local chapter of the Royal British Legion (and probably a few others). Anne called Margaret from the shop on the High Street and Margaret then put a sign in her shop window. Chris got a call from Mel or Linda in the Council Offices and then started to pick up the phone himself to ring the people on his list.

This information network was not necessarily the most efficient it could have been but certainly very effective. Personal links were created and maintained in this continuous effort shown by the volunteers and key actors. From handwritten phone lists to personal phone calls every single time – what started to come into existence here was not just a sterile information network, it was

really a living tree of social connections among people. And the personal style of the entire operation in Wootton Bassett did not wane over the entire period of four and a half years. The Town Clerk observed this as well:

One of the things I have found really odd is that you look back at the town council minutes over the last four and a half years, there are no mentions of repatriations in there. And yet it has dominated the work we have done but it has not come through the official channels of council minutes because we didn't talk about it at council meetings because there was nothing to talk about at council minutes. If there was any talking to do, it got done quietly and actually there wasn't even a lot of that.

Johnathan and I very much agreed on this point. My impression gained during my fieldwork was that with 12,000 inhabitants this could be a big enough place to start to feel a little anonymous – but Wootton Bassett was far from it. It felt like a small village in which everyone knew everyone else, their business and the newest gossip. News travelled via Chinese whispers, as Jan said earlier, and the town centre with its small shops was very important as a social hub in this process. For an informal network to function in such a way as it did here, one needs key actors in established roles, who have the time and resources to invest in this process. These key actors here were councillors, veterans and others who volunteered to bring the subject of the repatriation tributes to the attention of a wider public. They had first hand access to the information and took the decision (informally and ad-hoc on their own accord) to put notices up and start calling people. With time, these key actors and initiators turned into the keepers and makers of the ritual – they were the ones asked by a growing number of people all those questions about the how, where, what and why of the ritual.

Something old, something new, something borrowed...

The repatriation rituals in Wootton Bassett reflect a meaning-making process that unfolded at the time of observation. The first cortège was an unprecedented challenge that was met by an improvised reaction. The people who gathered that day on the roadside reacted in ways which made sense to them individually and that referred to a cultural-historic repertoire of behaviour accessible to them. Some of the key elements that eventually came to constitute the ritual had been there in some form or another beforehand and were reappropriated in this process of cultural bricolage. The story of ritualisation here is one about contingencies and accidents just as it is about minute planning, orchestration and the power of identification. But most importantly, it allowed us to get a very close look at how improvisation works. In the event of the unexpected, this community was challenged to recreate a shared sense of belonging and

community and they did so in a collective performance of the very values that made them feel they belong.

The ritual elements that were discussed in the different sections above all demonstrate to some degree or another the complexity of the ritualisation process. On the one hand, we were able to trace elements like the hearses, the silence, the paging away and the bell back to old customs. At the same time, coincidences led actors to use them in a new context and in non-intended ways. Sticking to what we know (and what others would recognise as well) allows us to feel a sense of continuity and we can avoid having to make everything up again and again. The beautiful thing about ritualisation, however, is that at the same time as reminding us of collective knowledge of symbolic practices, it also goes to show that we are not stuck in a loop of constant repetition of the past. It would be much closer to the truth to say that nothing really stays the same and that culture is in fact all about loose frameworks that set the tone but leave space to 'bumble'. That improvisation happens within existing frameworks whilst recreating those and creating new ones simultaneously in a dialectical process.

Chapter 6 Consolidation

No fuss. No flowers or razzmatazz. No tired old formulae of condolence dished out by the PM before the argy-bargy of Prime Minister's Questions begins. Just thousands of people, young and old, standing with lowered eyes and lumps in their throats at the thought of yet more young lives ended in a distant land.

(Daily Telegraph 07/07/2009)

The repatriations of Wootton Bassett were simple but poignant; rituals that could cast a spell on thousands of people at a time. In the last chapter, the actual ritual elements and performances were analysed in detail. I argued that the incremental ritualisation which was in evidence at Wootton Bassett was a meaning-making process that offers us insights into many areas of social life: changes, challenges and tensions within groups; ritual frameworks, their making and influence; ambiguities and visions about the future of groups. In this chapter, I shall look at another side of ritualisation. My review of the literature about ritual theory has found that many scholars are criticised for taking a one-directional approach to their subject of study: some focus on function, others on efficacy, symbolism or performance. In my understanding, there are three sides to rituals, all of which need to be included in a comprehensive account such as the one I present in this thesis. The first is a matter of *what people do do*, the second of *what they say they do* and the last is of *what ritual does for people*. The first necessitates looking at the performative part, the action *per se*. This part, the performance sequences and their origins, was the primary focus of Chapter 5, and I shall begin this chapter by revisiting these themes. Throughout the years, the discourse about Wootton Bassett and the repatriation ritual developed, changed focus and connected the local with the national spheres. This discourse, the part about what they say they do, looks at what these actions meant to the people involved, whether directly or indirectly, and how they made sense of them by integrating their narratives into more complex understandings of their social and political environment. In this chapter, I will follow the chronological course of events and analyse them in their context to create a better understanding of how the story about the repatriations unfolded. The effects these ritualised practices have on people, once again whether directly or indirectly, will be the subject of Chapter 7.

The consolidation phase of ritualisation

Most rituals probably once started small, and that is certainly the case with the tribute for the fallen in Wootton Bassett. In the past chapter, we have seen how different elements were added gradually to the, originally simple, tribute. Every new element and every new participant group

brought with them their own improvisations to the initial model. When families and visitors joined the ranks of locals, for example, the individual repatriation ceremonies became more personalised and temporary elements were sometimes added to the more established model. On one occasion, for example, two ex-servicemen played ‘Men of Harlech’ on flute and drums during a repatriation to welcome back a member of the Welsh Guards (*SA* 07/07/2009). Around the same time, other veterans’ associations started to attend the repatriations representing their former regiments or regional British Legion chapters with their standards and specially coloured blazers and berets.

For local key actors and groups these creative improvisations by non-local individuals or groups were often perceived as a digression from their unwritten rules. Yet to say so publicly was very difficult because, at the same time, the town was supposed to have no ‘enthusiasm for attempts to formalise and militarise the simple, spontaneous show of respect’ (*Daily Telegraph* 07/07/2009); on the other hand, however, ‘locals battle to keep the original spirit unsullied’, as the reporter in the *Daily Telegraph* put it. Following this statement of the absence of rules and formalisation, the *Telegraph* article continued with a quote from a member of Wootton Bassett’s British Legion, the group of veterans that happened to be present when the very first repatriation cortège came through the High Street and hence started the tribute. The veteran explained that the local group had decided to wear their berets but no medals and no standard. Nonetheless, ‘the street has become dotted with regimental standards.’ Expressing his dismay with these rogue additions, he said ‘Unfortunately, we now get 12 to 18 of them. We can’t stop people bringing them, but the townspeople don’t want it. On Monday, there was a band and music, too. We want to keep this as it as been for the last two years. It’s about individuals paying homage to the fallen.’ (*Daily Telegraph* 07/07/2009).

Music, clapping, flags, the attention of the media, the hijacking by politically motivated actors and the labels that were cast upon the ‘simple and spontaneous’ local tribute, potentially ‘sully’ its ‘authentic’ spirit: over the years, local actors’ ideas of what this ritual was supposed to be like were challenged on many occasions, both by those who attended the rituals and by those who wrote about it (the media), but mostly by the latter. Sometimes, as with the bell-ringing and the standards, they found a way to integrate the improvised element into the current model of the ritual, at other times a spontaneous gesture like clapping was met with widespread opposition (cf. Chapter 5 for this example). Those early improvisations and small-scale efforts were constantly tested against new developments and changing circumstances. As a consequence, the

performance, but also the discourse surrounding it, developed, transformed and stabilised only after some time. In the following, I will examine this phase in which the ritual and all that belonged to it (performance, actor roles, tone, script and narrative) stabilised and were consolidated. Through the validation it received from the inside and the outside, the ritual demonstrated that it worked, that it was effective and flexible enough to integrate different groups as well as individuals' ideas. Or rather, that the ritual (and its mediation) opened a platform for discussion on which different groups could project their ideas.

The evolution of Wootton Bassett's tribute to the fallen is not only a story of how *local* actors added different elements to a ritual ceremony in the making. It is most important to remember that this was a wider public phenomenon, expanding beyond local boundaries and exposed to the scrutiny of the world *outside* the small circle of people who started the tributes. If we are to comment on the success of the ritual, we also need to consider its presence in the public sphere and the many ways both the town and the ritual have attained symbolic value in public discussions of wider issues. To that end, I have examined local and national news coverage of the repatriations and the town, specifically during the four and a half years when the cortège was routed through Wiltshire. The local search was completed in the electronic archives on the website of the *Swindon Advertiser*¹, the daily tabloid newspaper for the area of Swindon and North Wiltshire². Whereas other papers circulate in the area, the *Advertiser* and its sister papers are considered the local papers. According to my participants, 'the *Western Daily Press* does also circulate in the area but is not generally considered to be the local paper as it has more of a regional feel'. Articles from national and international papers have been included in the analysis. The media was an important actor that both reported the events in Wootton Bassett and disseminated information, but also created news items and stories that in turn started to spark public interest. Without the many ways through which newspapers, websites, radio and TV broadcasts and social media reach and connect people with each other, the phenomenon of the repatriations would have never reached the levels of publicity that it did. In the following, I shall discuss this process that transformed the local ritual into a nationally recognised institution in its chronological sequence. This will also give me the opportunity to take the reader through the main events and their historical development throughout the years 2007-2011.

¹ See: <http://www.swindonadvertiser.co.uk/archive/>.

² The search engine also includes articles published in the *Gazette and Herald*, a weekly paper delivered to households on Thursdays and housed in the same offices than its sister paper the daily *Advertiser*. The archives offered no distinction between the two papers or their corresponding articles other than an occasional note of 'by our Gazette Reporter' next to the time stamp. In the in-text reference, I will thus only refer to them as found in the *Swindon Advertiser* or *SA*.

The early years: 2007-2008

Despite the fact that the local papers had reported that Lyneham's airbase was to receive all repatriation flights from April 2007 onwards (*SA* 20/03/2007), the first regular repatriation in early April was oddly not considered a news item by the local paper as I found no trace of it in the *Advertiser*. In retrospect, this may sound strange but at the time, no one had expected anything extraordinary to happen until it in fact did. The second repatriation through Lyneham and Wootton Bassett, on Thursday 12 April 2007, was first announced in the *Gazette and Herald* as 'Bodies of Iraq blast soldiers flying in to RAF Lyneham' (12/04/2007) and then reported on in the evening under the title 'Town's sad homecoming for Iraq blast victims' (*SA* 12/04/2007). According to the report in the *Advertiser*, the repatriation flight arrived at RAF Lyneham at nine o'clock. A little later:

About 40 people gathered at the Wootton Bassett war memorial to pay their respects. At 11am the traffic was stopped and two police cars escorted the hearses. Some onlookers wiped tears and blessed themselves. (*SA* 12/04/2007).

It is interesting to note at this point that two important symbols were part of the imagery that was created by the report in the local paper: first, the flag-draped coffins, and second the veterans and civic leaders observing a silence at this symbolic time of the day by the War Memorial. Reflecting the date and hour of the formal end of hostilities in 1918, an eleven-o'clock silence is an integral part of British Remembrance Day rituals; since the 1920s, a nationwide silence has traditionally been held at this time on the eleventh day of November each year, to commemorate the fallen. Here, however, at this second regular repatriation, the time was absolutely random. It could have been 10:47am or 11:06am when the hearses drove by but the reporter makes an effort to use this symbolic time. In addition, as mentioned in Chapter 3, the role of the War Memorial in this is just as contingent. It happened to be erected in the centre of town in 2004, which happened to be a space that affords a certain use. Throughout the entire development of the repatriation ritual, there is a beautifully opaque line of contingencies, of stories about skip lorries and other unpredictable coincidences, which were skilfully tied into a more coherent and meaningful narrative. The fact that the hearses ended up stopping by the memorial was due to a skip lorry blocking the road. The bell was a spontaneous act of improvisation. And the 11am passing of the cortège in this first official report from Wootton Bassett was just another skip lorry-type story in this sequence of contingencies in ritualisation.

Connecting the new and unexpected with their socio-cultural knowledge, the 40 people present at the second repatriation and the *Swindon Advertiser* reporter made sense of the event in their own ways. The imagery of remembrance conjured up by the reporter could be easily understood by any British reader and, above all in a town with a strong military tradition, it was an imagery that was close to people's hearts. In the following months, the cortèges kept coming through Wootton Bassett and even though local media only infrequently reported the repatriations, there was a steady stream of people showing up in the town centre each time, supporting the effort of the local veterans.

In August 2007, the *Swindon Advertiser* reported that the High Street was full of all kinds of people, not just members of the British Legion: 'one could expect people to become desensitised but they are not' (*SA* 31/08/2007). In a way, this is key to the development of events: the now regular sight of the coffins, the cortège and the small group of local veterans in their blazers and berets standing by the War Memorial did not become routine or ordinary. The phenomenon started to grow and the more war dead one had come to pay respect to, the more it became disrespectful not to show up the next time, and the time after that, to honour those other dead service personnel in the same way.

Community in empathy

By September 2007, the first family members of the dead soldiers began to join the crowd lining the streets in Wootton Bassett. As one resident explained in an interview in the local news:

This was the first time we had one of the families here. This was by far the most emotional because of that. They seemed to know which coffin was theirs. It is like time stands still when they come past. It has become very overwhelming. I think there has been two weeks since April where we haven't had a repatriation. (*SA* 27/09/07)

From this point onwards, the feelings of grief and loss started to move into the foreground of the news reporting about the tribute to the fallen in Wootton Bassett and themes related to remembrance moved into the background. In the previous chapter, I discussed how the attendance of families changed the atmosphere on the High Street noticeably. Confronted with their loved ones in flag-draped coffins, the mourners often showed their bare emotions and the sound of weeping cut through the silence on the High Street as the hearses stopped at the war memorial for a short period of time (another contingency that had become established as a ritual element, see Chapter 5). For these brief moments, the hundreds and often thousands of people that had gathered were witnesses of a very private kind of grief expressed by the mourners, and

many could empathise. In the words of the reporter of the *Advertiser*, and thereafter many other commentators on the ceremonies, the crowds on the streets of Wootton Bassett were described as one communal body united in collectively experienced emotions: ‘Town suffers grief of Army families’ read the headline of this article (*SA* 27/09/2007).

In the following years of news reporting of the repatriation rituals, it became common practice to simplify the complex reality of the different groups and individuals on the High Street by referring to them as one communal body. Calling Wootton Bassett the ‘small town par excellence’, Michael Freedon (2011: 4) suggests that ‘The town has adopted the private persona of an individual or, more accurately, of a close-knit family of citizens or denizens, removed from the public sphere.’ But whereas Freedon (2011) focuses on what he calls a ‘privatization of mourning’, I think the interesting effect of this is a ‘symbolic construction of community’ (cf. Cohen 1985), which, even though it may come as a label from the outside, has an effect on internal or self-identification of this community, too. ‘The town’ was turned into an actor, an umbrella term that could be used for short and pithy headlines, whilst standing for the diverse groups of people that came together for each repatriation. Sometimes, ‘the town thanked’ people, other times, it ‘stood still’, ‘paid tribute’, it ‘braced for another repatriation’, at times it ‘falls silent’, ‘awaits’ and ‘turns out’. And Wootton Bassett did not just act like a human, it also apparently experienced emotions like one: Wootton Bassett often ‘weeps’, ‘cries’ (Schulman and Strachan 2010; *The Guardian* 25/02/2010; *The Daily Mail* 30/12/2009; *The Observer* 14/09/2008) or ‘swells with pride and patriotism’ (*BBC News* 12/10/2008).

Over time, *the town* had turned into an actor with moral standards and a conscience for traditions and honour. It symbolically stood for community, a collective body of people acting as one and feeling as one, sharing the same values and expressing their sameness in the repatriation ritual. That this rhetoric expressed the pragmatic simplification of a much more complex reality was not surprising. After all, if a reader had looked up the word ‘town’ in a dictionary then the headlines of these articles would not have made any sense because here it stood for more than just a human settlement of a certain size. This use of words as nominal descriptors of a collective identity (cf. Jenkins 2004: 76/77 and 112) simultaneously creates a powerful sense of conformity *within* the group by marking the boundaries of this town’s sense of self, as Anthony Cohen explains about ‘we-talk’:

Such general statements of position, if not exactly fictions, are often sufficient distortions of individuals’ aspirations that they would not pass *within* the community. However, the formulation of such general positions for communication for another party often also

feeds back into the community to inform its sense of self, and thereby embellish its symbolic boundaries. (Cohen 1985: 35)

Using organic analogies to symbolise the collective does not only have a long history in the use of common language but also in sociological theory. From Durkheim's metaphor of society as an organism, to expressions like 'head of state', such analogies remind us, as Jenkins (2004: 119) argues, that the embodied individual and the abstract collective converge in this symbolisation. The practical aspect of this is obvious:

...what might otherwise be vast amounts of information about people, condensing it into manageable forms, the symbolisation of identification also allows us, sociologically and in everyday life, to think about and model – in other words imagine – collectivities and the relations between them. (Jenkins 2004: 119)

But much more so, he continues, collective symbolisation...

... allows individual diversity and collective similarity to coexist within the human world. There is no need to wonder about why people who 'are' the same don't all 'do' the same. For practical purposes and in certain contexts, we simply imagine them as more or less the same. (Jenkins 2004: 119)

Glossing over the complex realities of the individual makeup of a group awards this group with a certain degree of consistency and thus predictability. 'The town' is a term that places the spotlight on the communal aspect of interaction in the narrative and away from any individual ideas, actions or convictions, which, although are not denied as such, fade into the background or 'back-stage', as Jenkins (2004: 119) explains borrowing Goffman's terms:

The unity of selfhood is in one sense an umbrella or mask, under or behind which the diversity and contradictions of the individually embodied point of view over time and across situations can coexist, back-stage, without having to be perpetually in the front-stage public limelight (to the likely confusion of self and others).

The use of the descriptors 'the town' and 'the townspeople' became more and more common in these early days of the ritual and finally replaced other accounts that referred to the individual groups of people that gathered on the High Street.

Official recognition

The presence of the families and the growing interest of the press in this small-scale local tribute soon spread the news, and in early November 2007, Chief of General Staff General Sir Richard Dannatt thanked the town's residents for their continuing efforts in a personal letter to the mayor:

I am writing to express my sincere gratitude for the support that you, the town council and the people of Wootton Bassett continue to show to our troops and their families. The Army, and indeed all the Armed Forces, are enormously grateful to those who do help. In many respects, it is the things that cost nothing that are the ones that are the most important – a friendly greeting in the street, a prayer in the church, a reference in the local paper, or people paying their respects to those soldiers who have fallen in battle. But the gestures shown by the people of Wootton Bassett during the repatriation of those tragically killed on operations surpass these at every level. The respect shown by you all to the families of our fallen soldiers mean a significant amount to them at such a difficult, dark time.

(Swindon Advertiser 'Town thanked over respect for war dead' 14/11/2007)

It is hardly a surprise that this official gesture of recognition came at a time when many Britons traditionally don poppy badges and gear up for Remembrance Day, with the related war-related themes in the media. Reports now came in about how Wootton Bassett had started to receive messages of thanks from around the world. The different groups involved in the tribute, its organisation and the smooth conduct, were one by one awarded with different honours by different organisations. In January 2008, for example, the local Royal British Legion received a special certificate from its umbrella organisation praising its efforts (*SA* 17/01/2008). Lynham and the effort of the local police force were lauded by the MoD in September 2008 (*SA* 05/09/2008) and bell-ringers from all three services said their own special thank you to the town by tolling the bells of St Bartholomew and All Saints Church in a quarter peal performance known as Grandsire Triples in November (*SA* 12/11/2008). The Town Council and the Legion had also started to receive letters from individuals who thanked them for lining the streets and paying their respects, whereas others were sent directly to the local paper (cf. *SA* 02/07/2008).

In February 2008, town councillors Chris and Audrey Wannell set up a memorial wall in the local library where these letters and thank-you cards went on display for the residents to see because, so Chris explained:

'We wanted to make sure that the people of Wootton Bassett could see just how much comfort they have provided as a community to the families of those who died. ...//... It's something the townspeople should be proud of – that we have shown our respect and support for our service personnel who pay the ultimate price' (*SA* 21/02/2008).

This wave of official recognition came at this stage mostly from the side of the military and official organisations. Thanking the town for its support on behalf of the Ministry of Defence, the local airbase in Lynham organised an appreciation parade through Wootton Bassett on a Sunday in mid-October 2008. *BBC News* (12/10/2008) reported: 'Today, in what felt like summer's last glorious hurrah, thousands cheered and clapped as brass bands representing all

three services marched along the high street. Patriotism and pride were much in evidence.’ On this Sunday afternoon in mid-October, representatives of all three forces paraded down the High Street accompanied by marching bands and a flyover by a C130 Hercules and a C17 Globemaster:

On Sunday, under blazing autumn skies, the armed forces marched on the town to say thank you. Usually, the sight of the vast C-17 transport plane, making its final approach to nearby RAF Lyneham, heralds the arrival of flag-draped coffins from Afghanistan or Iraq. But when the aircraft’s four jet engine roared low over the high street, flags fluttered and a cheer went up. Air Chief Marshal Sir Clive Loader told the crowd the military was here for one reason alone ‘And that’s to pay tribute to a townspeople who have shown an uncommon humanity’. (*BBC News* 12/10/2008)

Officials who attended praised the unwavering effort shown by the townspeople of Wootton Bassett for every single repatriated soldier. The repatriation ceremonies were said to have set a remarkable example of showing support for the forces. With its close ties to the military, Wootton Bassett appeared to want to express a simple and non-judgemental kind of support that was, as I shall discuss later, unusual and often controversial at this time. Yet, being edged more and more into the public light, what townspeople wanted the tribute to be about was one thing and how the outside world interpreted these acts often quite different. The military parade in October 2008 was to thank the town for what was now interpreted by the media, the MoD and others as a clear demonstration in ‘pride and patriotism’ (*BBC News* 12/10/2008). During a ceremony on the day of the parade, the Mayor was presented with a beautifully adorned scroll praising Wootton Bassett for its support for the troops:

To the good people of Wootton Bassett,

Let it be known that on this, the twelfth day of October in the Year of the Lord two thousand and eight, representatives of all three of Her Majesty’s Armed Forces did gather in a display of military pomp and pageantry to show their heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to the good people of Wootton Bassett for the dignity and respect they have shown to those that have lost their lives in the service of their country and who have been repatriated under the auspices of Operation Pabbay¹.

The public display of support you have shown upholds the principles of the Military Covenant and further reaffirms the strong bond of friendship that exists between Wootton Bassett and Royal Air Force Lyneham.

We salute you.

Even though the town accepted these and other honours in a publicly expressed spirit of modesty, gratitude and pride in being recognised for their efforts, one could sense the beginning of a growing resistance against over-appraisal and external interpretation. As Mayor Leighfield

¹ ‘Operation Pabbay’ is an umbrella title for the repatriations of British servicepersonnel.

explained carefully to *The Guardian* (14/09/2008): 'It's something we wish Wootton Bassett didn't have to be recognised for. But we are very proud.' Similarly, in an interview with *BBC News* (16/09/2008) he repeats 'I really am honoured that they should consider doing this because we don't do it for any recognition. But to be honoured in this way, words fail me I think it's absolutely amazing.' This was only the beginning of the growing attention, presents, awards and honours bestowed upon Wootton Bassett between 2007 and 2011. The more this intensified, the more local actors seemed to be torn over the focus it put on the town rather than the fallen soldiers and their families. Examples below from the later years of the tribute will explore this point in more detail.

Support for the troops

For many, the Wootton Bassett phenomenon was a godsend, as *The Guardian* points out in September 2008:

... the army, airforce and navy see the people of Wootton Bassett as unsung heroes during these trying times. To them it is the town that cares when soldiers fear wearing uniforms in public in some places or face being turned away from hotels, and when arguments rage over homecoming parades. (14/09/2008)

Public support not just for the troops but also for the military efforts in Afghanistan, and above all in Iraq, was in desperate demand by the Labour government under Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who was now dealing with the fallout from Tony Blair's administration. Calls for an immediate inquiry into the Iraq war had been getting louder and the Prime Minister was under pressure from the opposition to conduct such an investigation. In December 2008, Brown declared it would be detrimental to start an inquiry immediately while there are still many British troops in Iraq. In the national news, political reporting now increasingly included references to Wootton Bassett's repatriation ceremonies, the respect shown for the bodies of soldiers and the growing human cost of both conflicts. *The Guardian* (19/12/2008) coupled a statement of the government 'An inquiry is not appropriate now...' with the announcement of further deaths 'he was the 134th British serviceman to die in Afghanistan' and a report from the latest repatriation ritual: 'Up to 1,000 people lined the streets of Wootton Bassett in Wiltshire yesterday as the bodies of five soldiers landed from Afghanistan; three were Royal Marines, killed by a suicide bomber aged 13.' The direct link between these three separate bits of information is never made explicit; nonetheless, the subtext reminds the reader in no unclear words about the loss of life that was part of these conflicts. 'Wootton Bassett' had gradually become a symbolic yardstick of public opinion about the war.

The publicised external validation of the repatriation ritual coming from generals, politicians, charitable organisations, individuals and, most importantly, the families of those repatriated was an important milestone in the process of institutionalisation. In early 2008, however, no-one imagined that this was only the tip of the iceberg with respect to gathering public acknowledgement of their small-scale tribute. Nonetheless, the phenomenon had already begun to establish itself as a regular event. What used to be a simple local affair was now under the scrutiny of all those who raised their voices to laud the effort and who brought to it their own associations, interpretations and practices. After almost a year of frequent and regular repatriation ceremonies, the ritual process had stabilised to a large degree, as had all those activities connected to it: the information network, the police effort, the reporting style of the local newspaper, as well as the official comments made by Wootton Bassett's key actors. What began as an improvised effort now started to go through a thorough process of institutionalisation, involving external scrutiny, validation and stabilisation. Routines were established and expectations created.

The Swindon Advertiser

One example of these expectations can be seen in June 2008 when the *Swindon Advertiser* published an article titled 'Plea for people to pay their respects' (*SA* 02/06/2008), in which people across the area were encouraged to pay their respects for a fallen marine. Continuity seemed crucial to locals, as they expressed worries that, due to the late repatriation time on this specific day, fewer people would come out to pay their respects. 'It is obviously concerning that as shops will not be open at this time our repatriated soldier will not be getting the respectful treatment our services have come to expect since April 2007', explained a shop owner and Legion member to the reporter.

The *Advertiser* itself had by the end of 2008 begun to take on an important role as sounding board and channel of communication for the townspeople. Simultaneously, it had an active role pushing forward the institutionalisation of the ritual. 'The inside story of Wootton Bassett's repatriations' published at Christmas 2008 read:

Every time a fallen war hero is returned to home soil, their Union Flag-draped coffins travel through Wootton Bassett.

And every time the townspeople turn out in their hundreds to pay silent tribute to the servicemen and women who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

(SA 25/12/2008)

The paper did not just report from these regular events but also started to occasionally announce them beforehand, e.g. on 11 June 2008 when the reporter interviewed the local police about their involvement in an upcoming repatriation; the article starts ‘Residents of Wootton Bassett are poised to receive the bodies...’ in a ‘heart-rending procession through the High Street [which] is planned for 4.45pm on Monday’. ‘Wootton Bassett will grieve for our loss’ said one policeman to the reporter. And even though people do not call the ritual a tradition yet, as they started to in early 2009 (cf. SA 03/02/2009), it is already well established and taken-for-granted. A fact that the *Advertiser* does not fail to emphasise in its ‘inside story’.

In 2008, the coverage of the repatriations by the *Advertiser* slowly went over to a twofold model: first, the paper announced the death and subsequent repatriation of an individual, together with the expected time of arrival of the cortège in Wootton Bassett town centre. This was then followed in a later edition by a full news report of the event. From mid-2008, ‘standard’ repatriation reports started to appear more regularly. They appeared to follow the same template, which usually started with a variation of this opening statement: ‘Hundreds of people [braved the weather and] lined the streets of Wootton Bassett to pay their last respects/honour/stand still...’. This was followed with details about the names, ranks, age and hometowns of the repatriated soldiers. Then, a closer report about the military repatriation at the airbase for the families and the passage of the hearses from Lyneham through Wootton Bassett to Oxford: ‘the procession paused at the war memorial before continuing...’ A description of the scene on the High Street on that day and a short mention of current news topics were interspersed with more information about the deceased, the circumstances of their deaths and information about their families. To this, several quotes by attendants of the ceremony, family members or commanding officers were added. Finally, the reports often rounded up standard repatriation articles by stating the official total death tolls and related statistics.

As time went on, the *Advertiser* became a shaper of events and ceased to be a simple reporter of them. It was not just a communication channel for Wootton Bassett but also expressed itself in its own right. As local newspapers usually depend for their content on local trivia, the *Advertiser* had struck gold with the reporting of the repatriations: regular events of national interest that at the same time never lost their novelty, since every time there was a new story to be told about the most recent casualties of the wars. Standard reports could be cross-referenced with current political debates or interlaced with heart-breaking stories directly from the High Street. These

opportunities for ‘real’ journalism were not just regular but also mostly uncontroversial to write about: only occasionally did readers respond directly to the journalists with letters to the paper or in the online comment section.

2009: year of highs and lows

So ends 2009, a year partly defined by that great ongoing national show of respect for the military. ...//... More than ever, the daily plateful offered by the red-tops includes endless tributes to ‘our boys’ – and though it would be easy to malign all this manipulative jingoism, it chimes with something palpably there in the national mood, and built on a fascinating mixture of admiration and sympathy. (*The Guardian* 23/12/2009)

By the end of 2008, Wootton Bassett’s repatriation ritual had become established as an exemplary act of tribute to the fallen. The following year marked a time when the town was met with new challenges that came with its growing profile in the national and even international news. The Queen’s Christmas message in December 2009 summarised the year as one that had been overshadowed by a record-breaking loss of life in Afghanistan. ‘Each year that passes seems to have its own character, some leave us with a feeling of satisfaction, others are best forgotten. 2009 was a difficult year for many...’ she explained whilst footage in the background showed Wootton Bassett’s High Street during a repatriation in July (*The Guardian* 25/12/2009¹). Gearing up to a general election in May 2010, for many this was a time to take stock of the Government’s achievements and failures. The conflict in Iraq, although coming to an end, had already become tainted as one of New Labour’s biggest mistakes and the engagement of British troops in the international effort in Afghanistan showed neither progress nor a predictable end, whilst costing more and more British lives in Helmand. Even though Wootton Bassett’s tribute to the fallen had always been declared apolitical by the ritual’s key actors, the town soon saw itself pulled into a whirlpool of national politics and individual agendas.

By July 2009, combat operations for British troops under Operation Telic in Iraq had ceased and troops were gradually withdrawn. At the same time, however, the campaign under Operation Herrick in Afghanistan witnessed its bloodiest year in the thirteen years of the conflict. Since 2007, the increased use of improvised explosive devices (IED) had proven a game changer in the fight between the Taliban and ISAF forces, injuring and killing many more soldiers and civilians than before. According to MoD statistics², the Armed Forces in Afghanistan suffered 51

¹ This date reflects the online publication date.

² Operation Herrick casualty and fatality tables to 31 December 2014. (Retrieved May 2015)

fatalities in 2008 and then saw the number almost doubled in 2009 with 108 fatalities and 103 in 2010 before it decreased again to 46 in 2011 (an overview of both military operations is provided in Chapter 4). The year 2009 therefore broke many records and took the military, politicians and the general public by surprise. News reports hurried from one record statistic to the next: the 150th fatality in Afghanistan occurred in March 2009; the 70th repatriation in Wootton Bassett was held in May; June counted 300 deaths in both conflicts; July saw the bloodiest 24 hours with 8 killed; in August we were up to the 200th fatality in Afghanistan, and then the 100th repatriation in November 2009.

By then the pictures of the flag-draped coffins had become commonplace and Wootton Bassett had established itself strongly on the map, moving from an inconspicuous existence to being a centre of national attention on a regular basis. In July 2009, the death of eight soldiers in one day in Afghanistan marked a sad record for the country. News coverage of the repatriation ritual in Wootton Bassett reached a pinnacle on 14 July 2009, when thousands of people lined the High Street to witness the passage of the cortège. The repatriations in Wootton Bassett were now frequently attended by very large crowds of people, transforming the small local tribute that it used to be; rather than ‘hundreds lined the streets...’ the papers now reported thousands¹. News teams swarmed the High Street, there were camera teams from national and international broadcasters lined up and even a news helicopter circled over the town.

Wootton Bassett had also been firmly placed on the political agenda. It had inadvertently drawn attention to itself by way of being a grassroots initiative that appeared to reflect public opinion. Not just the media but also politicians used imagery from repatriations, references to the town or the location itself as a platform for their personal agendas. In November, Nick Griffin, leader of the far-right British National Party BNP, joined the crowds on the High Street for a low-key appearance at a repatriation. His presence triggered a storm of protest in the media for what was called a ‘media stunt’ (and worse) on his behalf (cf. *SA* 12/11/2009 ‘BNP leader’s appearance sparks debate’). Two months earlier, when Prime Minister Brown was giving a speech about the future of British troops in Afghanistan, Sky TV had chosen to broadcast the speech with a split screen that showed live footage of a repatriation ritual. Any mention of Afghanistan or the troops had become simultaneously linked to these images of flag-draped coffins in black hearses the public had grown to recognise so well. Even *BBC Question Time*, a well-known televised

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/op-herrick-casualty-and-fatality-tables-released-in-2014>.

¹ See: *BBC News* 14/07/2009; *Gazette and Herald/SA* 22/03/2009; *Sky News* 16/10/2011 ‘Hundreds and then thousands lined the streets’.

political discussion panel programme, jumped on the bandwagon and broadcast from Wootton Bassett in December 2009. The reactions to these different events within Wootton Bassett were mixed and a growing resistance developed, as I will explain further below. At the same time, public interest in the troops and the conflicts was heightened and homecoming parades in different towns and cities had turned into 'grand and emotional events' (*The Guardian* 14/07/2009) after they had been largely ignored for years. On repatriation days, Wootton Bassett too, was increasingly flooded with visitors who had come a long way to attend and show their respects. As large crowds come with their own logistical requirements, the town's council staff now had to deal with unexpected issues: To keep people safe, police bomb squads had to search the High Street's gullies and bins before every repatriation. On very hot days, the Town Council was concerned about health and safety and had to take measures to ensure there was enough water available for those who waited outside sometimes for hours before the hearses came. In anticipation of a repatriation, council employees staffed the phones to answer many queries about parking and arrival times of the hearses and countless other little issues that people used to ask them about. Business 'as usual' in the market town was effectively paralysed, for at least a few hours but sometimes even for a few days before and after a repatriation.

Meanwhile, the town saw itself increasingly flooded with gifts that different groups or regiments had sent to 'the townspeople' to give their thanks. Scrolls, commemorative plaques, paintings, engraved shells and many other objects slowly covered every square inch in the small Town Council offices with nowhere else to put them. At the same time, the council offices and the local British Legion were receiving an increasing number of personal letters and 'thank you' cards by individuals from all over the country and abroad, too. Efforts to honour Wootton Bassett in some way or another turned into a veritable hype mid-2009 that now reached the wider population. Grassroots efforts like online petitions and Facebook groups formed over different campaigns. T-shirts were printed, pins and bracelets sold and I even found a matching set of Wootton Bassett stationary in a local shop. Benefactors of the growing publicity were mostly charities like Help for Heroes and the newly formed Afghan Heroes, profiting from a newly found national interest in these issues.

Servicemen and -women were also beginning to add their voices to the growing clamour about the repatriations, and Wootton Bassett. For example, in August 2009, the poem *Repatriation*, written by a soldier serving in Afghanistan at the time, started to go viral in social media networks and was reprinted by newspapers and published on several websites.

Repatriation by Sgt. Andy McFarlane¹

The leviathan of the sky does land
In England's green and pleasant land.
Its cargo more precious than gold
The body of a hero, bold.

Once the giant's engines stopped
The cargo ramp is gently dropped
Carried by six on shoulders true
The hero is saluted by the crew.

The coffin draped in Union Jack
Is slowly carried out the back.
Out of the dark and into light
Slowly down the ramp and to the right.

The six approach the hearse all black
And place the hero gently in the back.
The six then turn and march away
Their duty has been done this day.

Politicians usually have much to say
No sign of them near here this day.
They hide away and out of danger,
Much easier if the hero is a stranger.

The hearse with its precious load
Moves slowly out onto the road.
The floral tributes line the route
While comrades snap a smart salute.

At the edge of a Wiltshire town
The cortege slows its pace right down.
The streets are packed, many deep,
Some throw flowers, most just weep.

The crowd have come to say farewell,
The church bell rings a low death knell.
Regimental standards are lowered down
As the hero passed through the town.

The cortege stops and silence reigns
The townsfolk feel the family's pain.
The nations' flag lowered to half mast
Our brave hero is home at last.

¹ This version was published on the website www.warpoetry.co.uk.

This is a good example of how stories about Wootton Bassett's small local tribute penetrated all platforms of public communication. This poem soon became part of a small campaign to collect and publish contemporary war poems, raising money for military charities.

Altogether, 2009 was not just a year of extremes in terms of death rates, media attention, political interest and public interest in the repatriation ritual; it was the year that eventually turned this local tribute into a national spectacle, whether the town wanted it or not. The ritual itself stabilised from its improvised and imperfect do-it-yourself style through the validation from the outside and the need for more regulation and management. And with the institutionalisation of the ritual practices also came the challenge to explain what it meant to people, why they came out and what it was people were doing. In creating this discourse, labelling actions and disseminating stories and pictures, the media was the major actor that both communicated between the national and the local levels and represented either at times.

Media coverage in 2009

To make a small local event public beyond parish boundaries, the different organs of the media are indispensable today. From print press publications over television, radio and the internet, stories are 'made' through the powers of broadcasting. Wootton Bassett's repatriation ritual became a 'phenomenon' when it hit the news, not just once or twice but regularly. Interested in how the media represented the events in this town and what effect this had both locally and nationally, one part of my ethnography focused on media coverage and, above all, newspapers. The year 2009 produced a much higher number of search results in the local and national news than any of the previous years. This is demonstrated in a diagram below: it shows the general fluctuation trends in media coverage of and interest in Wootton Bassett's repatriation ritual, by month and year. The combined fatality rates of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq are transposed as a graph.¹

¹ A similar attempts to quantify the media coverage of Wootton Bassett can be found in Jenkins *et al.* 2012: 359. Their data covers national broadsheets and tabloids only, between January 2006 and March 2010.

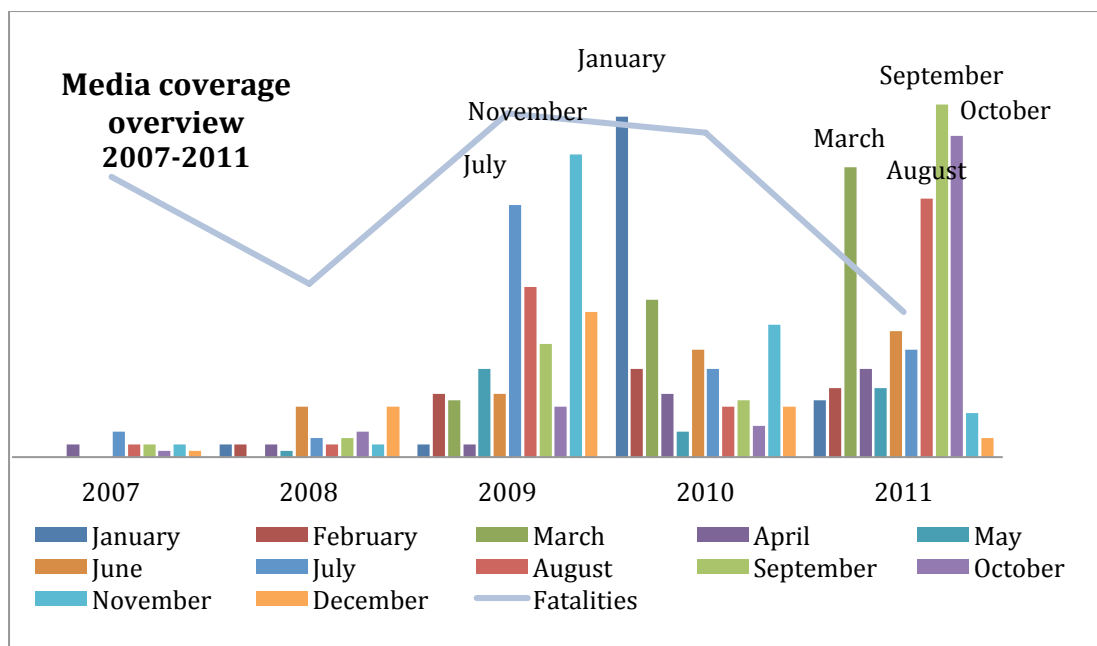


Table 1: Media coverage 2007-2011; fatality rate transposed.

As explained in Chapter 2, this data only presents the results of a search of online and offline media sources; these include the electronic archives of the *Swindon Advertiser*, national papers, news websites and personal blogs¹. The reason why I have chosen to present this data here is to visualise a *general* trend for the years 2007-2011 and to analyse the outliers in the data, i.e. the higher numbers of articles found in certain months. As might be expected, these directly correspond to major events. In Table 1, the highlighted outliers can be linked to 1) the repatriation of eight soldiers in July 2009; 2) November 2009 Remembrance Day and Nick Griffin’s visit; 3) January 2010 and the planned protest march of radical Islamist group Islam4UK; 4) March 2011: David Cameron’s announcement of the move of the repatriation flights and the royal accolade for Wootton Bassett; 5) August and September 2011 as the last repatriation through Wootton Bassett and the subsequent handover to Carterton; and 6) October 2011 celebrations of the change to *Royal* Wootton Bassett. The transposed fatality rate also shows that the media’s interest in Wootton Bassett and the repatriations follows the upward trend in fatalities in 2009, once the ritual had been established. The doubling of the death rate from 2008 to 2009 left a clear mark on the media coverage of related topics.

The role of the media

In the ritualisation process which transformed the repatriations into a public, almost ceremonial, event, the media came in as an outsider that eventually took on an important role in

¹ Details of the data that generated this diagram can be found in the Annex. The graph represents all fatalities counted as operational deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan.

consolidating and institutionalising the improvised performance, its key elements and its surrounding narrative. This was a very delicate process that ranged from passive and supposedly ‘objective’ reporting to active story-making or even myth-making. Whereas in the lived everyday realities of people within the town, exact labels were not needed to talk about the repatriations and if there was ambivalence it was irrelevant, the press and other public actors had to find descriptive terms and labels with which to talk about the events in Wootton Bassett to a wider external audience. The more the media got involved, the more we can also observe situations in which the townspeople’s view of ‘their’ *local* tribute differed from, or even clashed with, what the press was increasingly describing as a *national* phenomenon (in the process of which a national phenomenon was actually being created).

To call the repatriation ritual a ‘tradition’ is one example of how the media created certain labels. By ‘tradition’, what was meant was not the idea that this ritual had always existed, but rather that its existence had become taken for granted in a way that gave it an air of absolute naturalness and left no doubt that it would and *should* be continued in the future. The *Advertiser* increasingly referred to the tributes to the fallen in Wootton Bassett as a ritual that had ‘become tradition’ (e.g. 03/02/2009; 13/05/2009; 01/06/2009; 28/07/2009; 30/07/2009) or ‘custom’ (30/10/2009). But calling something a tradition does not yet make one. Sometimes, the reporters also simply got their facts wrong, like in June 2009, when one reporter explained that ‘...several hundred well-wishers honoured a tradition which began at the start of the war’ (*SA* 01/06/2009). What does make a tradition, however, is when particular actions are not just repeated several times but when there is *implicitness* about their regular reoccurrence. The quote above already hints at this understanding of unwritten rules by calling it a tradition that needed to be ‘honoured’, suggesting that it would be wrong not to. The mayor Steve Bucknell (2009-2010) explains this in an interview with the *Advertiser*: ‘The way we mark the repatriations has become a tradition in Wootton Bassett. We always hope the current one is the last one but we will carry on doing it for as long as is *necessary*.’ (26/06/2009, emphasis added). Once started, every soldier had to be honoured the same way every single time, otherwise the justifications that local people were giving for why they came out to line the street would have become insignificant. As a local resident explained to a reporter: ‘We will still be here when they come back, come rain, shine or hail.’ (*SA* 11/07/2009).

‘On behalf of us all...’

Another idea that was introduced by the media was that those who performed the ritual were seen as vicarious agents for all Britons. In a long article in the *Daily Telegraph* in July 2009 with the title ‘Wootton Bassett: A very British way of mourning’ (07/07/2009), the authors explain ‘how a small market town quietly came to represent us all’. The local tribute was not only linked to a wider national community now, i.e. ‘us’; the townspeople effectively were said to stand proxy for the nation doing something ‘very British’. Around July 2009, the media’s attention on Wootton Bassett had reached a first peak. Every paper, journalist or commentator spun their stories in their own way, whilst a general common vocabulary started to form and be exchanged and recycled amongst them. *The Guardian* called Wootton Bassett ‘a very English sort of place’ and ‘patriotic’ (18/07/2009); the *Independent* talked about a ‘new British way of mourning’ (18/07/2009) and explained that ‘In their unostentatious constancy, the people of Wootton Bassett have started a tradition, and set a standard, that the rest of the country can be proud of.’ (11/11/2009). The *Swindon Advertiser* describes the ‘town’s ongoing patriotism’ (14/07/2009) and reports from the repatriation of eight soldiers in July as ‘a very British tribute’ (14/07/2009). The ‘simple’ local tribute was actively consolidated as a ritual: repeated, made meaningful and turned into a ‘new tradition’. That something so new, improvised and spontaneous was now described as something so very ‘authentic’ to British culture and custom was not seen as problematic: ‘There’s a timelessness to the proceedings which belies their brief history’, exclaimed the authors in the *Daily Telegraph* article (07/07/2009).

The discourse in the media about the repatriations and the labels they used to describe the events were also mirrored in the way members of the wider public expressed themselves. A large part of the letters and cards that were sent to the town talked about representation in one way or another. One person from Swansea wrote in August 2009:

I feel that you are giving representation to those of us throughout the country who would line the street with you on these sad occasions. The truly dreadful thing to me is that these soldiers are no more than young lads who have only just started their adult lives.

A woman from Gloucester had sent a letter to the Mayor in November 2009:

Dear Mayor of Wootton Bassett, Mr Steve Bucknell

Yet again the town of Wootton Bassett on the 98th Repatriation of members of The British Armed Services gives each and every soul of the departed the most wonderful, warm welcome home ...//...

What happens in Wootton Bassett is very English and very British and it is correct and proper, it is the way we do things, it is a matter of honour and respect. ...//... [sic]

Similarly, a Stockport resident addressed the 'Leader of the Council' in November 2009:

Dear Sir,

I felt compelled to write and say that the people of Wootton Bassett are a credit to this nation and a wonderful example of the warmth and humanity badly needed in our rather fractious times. The sincerity of their commitment to our young, and not so young, soldiers is inspiring and the comfort they must give to the bereaved families, incalculable. Please find a way of telling them that the rest of the nation salutes you. You are an example of us all.

God bless you Wootton Bassett,

Yours with huge respect,

[name] (on behalf of the British people)

More carefully formulated is this letter sent to the Mayor by a resident of Nottingham from July 2009:

...I feel a need to write to you in order to make known my feelings of gratitude to the citizens of Wootton Bassett for the exemplary actions so often displayed in acknowledging the ultimate sacrifice made by so many of our brave service personnel, so often at such a tragically young age, in the service of their country.

It is refreshing, in these times of intense self-interest, to see so many people gather at these very sad occasions in support of those who have lost loved ones; your actions strongly demonstrate the fact that the ordinary folk of this country retain their traditional values of honour and respect for those who stand with and for us, from which I personally derive deep assurance.

I hope you don't mind, but I also take the liberty of considering that you represent me – a feeling that I am sure is shared by the vast majority of the UK's population who are unable to attend personally.

And a Shropshire couple wrote in the same month (original emphasis):

...We are in awe and admiration of the town and its exemplary behaviour. Indeed we firmly believe it sets an example to everyone in the country – it's the way we all should behave.

The underlying idea in these letters is that 'honour' and 'respect' are values that they consider at the heart of being British and, more importantly, values that are important for this community to which they count themselves.

An ambivalent reaction to the emergent discourse

In Wootton Bassett itself, this discourse was received with more ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, the images and language employed in newspaper articles and TV comments were echoed in how local people spoke about the ritual in public comments. On the other hand, however, many of those labels were applied with caution and hesitation. In July 2009, just after the largest repatriation in history, civic leaders of the town¹ sent a letter to the national papers. This letter marks an incisive point in the development of events, as the first official public statement by key actors on the impact of the media attention. Published in *The Guardian* on 16 July under the title ‘Wootton Bassett’s silent tribute’, the letter is a critique of press intrusion and distances itself from any kind of militarisation or politicisation. It reads in its entirety:

We who represent the people of the town of Wootton Bassett are honoured and humbled that the way we have paid our respects to our fallen soldiers has touched people in the way it has, and that in a way we stand proxy for the grief of the nation.

But we are simply the ordinary people of a very special town standing still and quiet for a few moments in a mark of sorrow and gratitude for those who have given their lives in service of the nation. We welcome people from all over the country who come to join us and we are proud that the national media has broadcast our moment’s stillness to the world, although we’d be grateful for slightly less intrusive media coverage in the future. We welcome visiting generals and senior politicians, if they would like to come and simply mingle with the crowds. But we’d prefer no pomp, nor militarisation. It’s the people of the town; no more nor less than that.

We’d also much prefer that there was no further discussion of any recognition for what we do, or at least not until it’s all over and that happy day has arrived when there are to be no more of these ‘repatriations’. We really do not want to be ‘Royal Wootton Bassett’, nor be awarded the GC², nor to rename our High Street. It’s not about us. It’s about our fallen brothers and sisters, husbands and friends. The power and pathos of the occasion is its simplicity; its peace and quiet in an angry world. And we, the people of Wootton Bassett, want it to stay exactly like that.

The style of the letter leaves no doubt to how strongly the authors feel about these points. The first sentences start with a positive message, yet are directly followed by contrasting conjunctions like ‘but’ and ‘although’. The latter part reads like a manifesto. Did they want Wootton Bassett to be turned into a vessel of Britishness and the ritual³ into an expression of the feelings of a

¹ The letter was signed by the local Conservative MP, James Gray, the mayor at the time, Steve Bucknell, town council leader, Chris Wannell, and the president of the local British Legion Maurice Baker.

² The George Cross is the second highest gallantry award in the UK, awarded for civilian courage and heroism, e.g. Malta in 1942.

³ Talking about ritual, I found it interesting that the letter avoided calling things by their names. Instead of saying ‘ceremony’, ‘tribute’ or even ‘ritual’, the letter speaks of ‘occasion’, ‘standing still’ and ‘the way we have paid our respects’. Would calling it a ritual, for example, already be considered presumptuous and too far from the proclaimed imaged of the simplicity of it all?

national communal body? Reading this letter, the answer is not clear and leaves a feeling of ambivalence that comes with this national recognition; ‘in a way’ they supposedly stand proxy for others. Yet, on the other hand, they ‘are *simply* the ordinary people of a *very special* town’. Like someone blushing over an unexpected compliment, there is an air of pride and, at the same time, discomfort. Just like they cannot decide either whether they want to be ordinary or special – a remarkable ‘ambivalent vacillation between diffidence and self-applauding smugness’ as Freedon (2011: 4) calls it. Instead, what the civic leaders did was to take ownership of the ritual by imposing (with evident repetition) their own labels on this emergent discourse. No matter what people said from the outside, to them it was above all simple, ordinary, quiet, still, not about pomp or recognition, ‘just’ the people of this town, but really not about them, and somewhat other-worldly: ‘The power and pathos of the occasion is its simplicity; its peace and quiet in an angry world.’ (*The Guardian* 16/07/2009).

In the latter half of 2009, the media started to express more self-criticism towards the discourse it had started (and still was) spreading. By the time Nick Griffin came to attend a repatriation in November, the idea of having ‘hijacked’ this local tribute becomes more and more evident (cf. *The Guardian* 10/09/2009; *SA* 10/11/2009). Maybe the people who lived in this town did not want all this attention and, maybe the swarms of people that descended upon the town whenever there were repatriations were seen as ‘funeral crashers’, not just with respect to the town’s tribute but, above all, with respect to the families that were there to mourn their dead. Emergent protectionism was the new trend amongst journalists and the new labels that Wootton Bassett’s leaders fought so hard for were now increasingly picked up and defended by outside voices, too – whether they seemed realistic or not; contradictory or not. Whereas the leaders rejected further recognition in their letter to the press, they readily accepted the Sun’s Military Award a few months later in December 2009, presented to them by Prince William. But then again, did they have a choice? One of the civic leaders who went to the award ceremony explained to the local paper:

Receiving the award was very humbling as we were in a room full of military people who were receiving awards for outstanding acts of courage. ...//... Most of the people in Wootton Bassett are totally embarrassed with the media attention that has been thrust upon us. We are just doing what we think is right and don’t want anything for it. (*SA* 16/12/2009)

The local Conservative MP James Gray, signatory of the letter quoted earlier, seemed to have a foot in both camps when it came to how or if the town should receive any official recognition. Several times he suggested that the town ought to be honoured, for example with a ‘royal’ prefix

or by receiving the war memorial from Camp Bastion in Afghanistan, once operations there had ceased (cf. SA 23/04/2009; 23/07/2010). Following this, Mayor Mike Leighfield (2008-2009) wrote a personal statement to the *Swindon Advertiser* in which he distanced himself from Gray's suggestions when they were first published in April 2009. He explained that, as an individual, he supported the idea but that the council as a whole had decided that it was not appropriate (SA 05/05/2009).

Orchestration, organisation and management

The Town Council had slowly become – more out of necessity than anything else – the invisible hand that conducted events, decided what was appropriate or not, and how they wanted to see their town portrayed in the public eye. Without wanting to spoil the purist idea of this 'spontaneous' and 'simple' tribute that had 'organically' developed, there was a need for greater management and a top-down orchestration of events. Yet, even after three years, the papers still referred to the ritual as 'the town's spontaneous repatriation ceremonies' (SA 27/01/2010). Or as an article in *The Guardian* (10/03/2010) explained the situation:

Sadly, it's all too obvious that the town is becoming a 'homeland' symbol that confers respectability on those who can prove or imply an association ...//... The gatherings for the repatriations began quietly, honestly, almost accidentally. Due in no small part to the sterling efforts of the town council, they continue to be mostly genuine, spontaneous and apolitical, but the attempted politicisation by the media and those who seek the town's reflected glory has been relentless.

This effort of the Town Council was much more extensive than it appeared to the public. Earlier, I mentioned how the town had to deal with issues about health and safety due to the large crowds gathering. The Council and the Commander of RAF Lyneham also worked together to avoid the coincidence of a repatriation cortège and other events like market days, funerals or weddings, if possible. To deal with the increasing number of standard bearers, the local chapter of the British Legion had already implemented their sequence of commands during the ritual. They had also set up a website and put together a standard document that informed potential visitors about how a typical repatriation works. Similarly, the Town Council had also had to decide how to react to the surge in phone calls and letters to their offices. Once, it was suggested to the staff that they could get an automated phone system that would allow a caller to choose an option depending on what kind of service they were inquiring for. The team answering the phones for the council, however, refused this and explained that they preferred to deal with callers one-by-one on a human level. For many, this decision was driven by the desire

to keep things as normal and low-key as possible. The Town Clerk called this a 'light touch' of organisation when he spoke about how things were done then:

... And it was done in sort of a... yeah... a little bit... sort of little bit cuddly-carey, ramshackley sort of way, which is exactly what everything had happened like.

Nothing about the repatriations in Wootton Bassett was organised, you see... It wasn't... every time we got to this point oh we should organise this or organise that... it was... well no, we shouldn't actually. Because that's what it was about: about people just coming together and show them we care, show them respect.

And every time we came to trying to do anything about organisation, we always took a step back and reminded ourselves that actually it is not about that. So, anything we did had to be very, very light touch. Especially for an office like this... start thinking about things like health and safety... think about lining a highway... and we had our conversations about shouldn't we rope off areas? Shouldn't we create barriers so that people can't spill into the highway and somebody could get knocked over... and of course we didn't want to do that. We didn't want to barrier it; it's not what it is about.

When it came to the thousands of cards, emails, letters and poems that were sent to the town over the months and years, the reaction was similar. By mid-2009, the increase in mail they received meant that a standard response was developed and used in answers to letters or emails. And the policy was that every piece of mail providing an address received an answer from the town, the mayor or whoever the initial letter had been addressed to. The Town Clerk, Johnathan Bourne, explained to me:

We had a policy of trying to answer every single email and every single letter where we had the address of the person sending it. OK, if somebody sends it anonymously, there is not much we can do about that. But if we got a reply address we would try to respond. I think by and large we succeeded doing that. I am not aware of any major gaps in that. Even though at times, I mean, I think following the repatriation in June 2009, I think, we had something like 300 to 400 emails coming within 24 hours of the repatriation. And that's difficult and that's a lot of work to get through that.

The standard response was only one small paragraph that dictated the tone of the message. The councillor or clerk who personally responded to a letter would then use the standard paragraph¹ and add a few lines themselves that answered to the original letter. The Council also frequently had to use their meetings in order to decide how to proceed with donations to the town, for example some people sent cheques, others lottery tickets, again others send money to be used to buy flowers and place them on the War Memorial. All of these tasks slowed down everyday jobs

¹ This is the standard answer: 'Thank you for your [letter/card/email] of [date] and for your support for the people of Wootton Bassett. Every one of the repatriations is a sad event which reinforces the pride and gratitude we feel for our armed services personnel. It is especially reassuring to know that throughout the country, and even the world, people like yourself feel the same as we do. If you are able to visit Wootton Bassett, you would be made most welcome. Perhaps you could spend a few quiet moments at our memorial.' (11 January 2010).

in the council offices and, in many respects, any other big projects had to be put on hold for as long as the repatriations would last. But an end was in clear sight since the closure of the air base in Lyneham had already been decided in 2003. Johnathan sums up:

So, it was trying to make them as personal as we could and certainly try and pick up any issues that were highlighted in the emails or letters. But it was, yeah... it was a big job. And what the council did was, on a strategic level, was that the council recognised that this was something that was important, it was something that needed to be done and it needed to be done as well as we could possibly do it. And therefore what the council was, I think, was very good and very realistic about, was they put on hold any other sort of projects or some things that they wanted done. It became the sort of thing... they understood that this was going to be very time-consuming and so they couldn't expect us to be doing 101 other projects all at the same time. And so the council actually was quite prepared to say OK we will sit that on the back burner. The council agendas all went very quiet, the project work all went very quiet because this was actually the project, this was the thing that we needed to do and do well.

The task of the Town Council was not very easy indeed. With the media's spotlights focused on the town and every sentence that was uttered appearing on television or in the papers, 'setting the framework right' (cf. Chapter 5) had turned into a tightrope act in which the council was trying to keep the balance between what needed to be practically done, i.e. managed, and how they wanted to appear in the process, i.e. as doing the right thing, something simple and selfless. All of the key actors I have interviewed had told me that the repatriations were *not* managed, organised or orchestrated – but they were, at least to a certain degree. Only some of these interviewees admitted to this after some reflection. The most honest and reflected response came from the Town Clerk, one of the people who had always been there in the background, since his office was not by mandate. After he gave some confidential examples, Johnathan summarised:

It's those logistical things we had to manage very very carefully with our friends at RAF Lyneham because we tried to let them know about things like this happening and they, in turn, had to try and shuffle their arrangements and work reasonable timings out to make sure that they don't... you know much wasn't obvious to people what was happening, that was the important thing. It needed to happen but it needed not to be obvious that it was being managed.

Aline: Is that something else that you would like to be confidential that it was being managed?

Johnathan: I um... [long pause]... we would... if you report it, I don't mind you reporting that but I do think if you do, could you... just try and get right that what we were trying to do is be respectful to the families of those that had lost loved ones. We were trying to do it in a way that would be respectful to them. So, although we were managing it slightly, I think more RAF Lyneham had that problem than we did. But I mean it was managed, there was no doubt about it. ... But it didn't happen very often.

The years 2010 and 2011

In late December 2009, rumours were leaked about the plans of an extremist Islamist group to march through Wootton Bassett. In early January 2010, these rumours proved to be true and the group Islam4UK, under their leader Anjem Choudary, proclaimed on their website that they intended to march through the town carrying cardboard coffins in order to remind people of the many Muslim civilian fatalities in Afghanistan. Choudary was quoted by the *Swindon Advertiser* (04/01/2010) thus:

The procession is not about having a protest against the people of Wootton Bassett. The idea is to raise awareness of what is happening in Afghanistan. Wootton Bassett is symbolic that people in Britain think their soldiers are fighting for the freedom and democracy. This protest will bring this debate in the open and I hope a lot of people will think carefully about what their military is doing in Afghanistan.

The loss of civilian life in Afghanistan or Iraq was hardly mentioned in the media and, in this respect, the group was seen to touch on an important issue. On the other hand, however, the group was publicly widely believed to hold extremist, even radical, views, to go in for media stunts and to have links to banned organisations. As soon as their plans were made public, the general public, the media and politicians joined voices in an outcry of protest against the march. Within only a few days, a Facebook group against the planned march had gathered over 326,000 likes and many spoke out on the issue. Prime Minister Brown called the plans ‘abhorrent and offensive’ (SA 05/01/2010) and said that the soldiers’ families needed to be protected from offence. The local Conservative MP James Gray wrote a letter to *The Guardian*, expressing his opposition to the group’s plans. Using the pronoun ‘we’ at times, he explains that the ceremonies are ‘absolutely apolitical’ and that ‘that’s why we are so opposed to the proposed Islam4UK’s march – it would be hijacking our quiet, simple ceremonies for political purposes.’ He continues: ‘they must not be allowed to sully the purity of the quietly respectful ceremonies of the good people of Wootton Bassett’ (*The Guardian* 04/01/2010). On behalf of his constituents, Gray makes a clear effort in his letter to emphasise the labels that he wished to dominate the discourse. Again and again, apolitical, simple and quiet seem to be the key words. Voices from the town itself commented on the news in a similar way, explaining what their tribute is about rather than engaging with the issue of the march itself. This topic clearly led to a highly politicised discussion, which required leadership from above and a very sensitive approach. That the march was not to take place in Wootton Bassett was clear but how this was going to be realised was not, nor who would make the final decision – anyone from the local authority to the

Prime Minister could have intervened. In the end, on 10 January 2010, Islam4UK announced that their plan for a march was cancelled, but what looked, with hindsight, like a publicity stunt cost them dearly when on 14 January 2010, the government proscribed the group under the Terrorism Act.

Soon after, business went back to usual. In late January 2010, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall paid the town a short visit to meet the people behind the tribute. Charles and Camilla avoided being there during the repatriation ritual in the morning but visited the War Memorial in the afternoon to pay their respects. Compared to any attention by politicians, members of the royal family always seemed to be welcomed. The ambivalence about recognition by other groups, however, continued and became obvious once again when a group of bikers decided to plan a charity ride through the town's High Street for Mother's Day. Calling it the 'Ride of Respect', this effort to raise funds for the charity Afghan Heroes quickly gained momentum within the online biker community and on Mothers Day, Sunday 14 March 2010, 15,000 bikers roared through the town. The event became a regular ride and was repeated in 2011 and 2012; after that it alternated between the new repatriation town Carterton and Wootton Bassett, raising over £100,000 every year.

International recognition

Come May 2010 and the general election, Britain received a Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government under the leadership of Prime Minister David Cameron. With the new regime came extensive cuts in public spending that reflected the economic crisis and rang in an age of austerity. His first state visit in July 2010 took David Cameron to the USA, where he met the President. Barack Obama lauded Wootton Bassett's tribute to the fallen in a press conference during the Prime Minister's visit: 'We want to honour our fallen warriors with the respect and gratitude they deserve. Whether it's here or in the small British town of Wootton Bassett: people line the streets in a solemn tribute that represents the best of British character' (*BBC News* 21/07/2010). In a similar vein, the town and the different key actors and groups organising the ritual on a regular basis kept receiving tokens of recognition from the general public and official bodies. The talk about honouring the town with a grand gesture had not subsided but was still not welcomed by the civic leaders in Wootton Bassett. At the same time, the local paper's attention to the individual repatriations slowly died down and the *Advertiser* opted to report only repatriations of special interest.

The route change

In December 2010, after it has been known already for seven years that RAF Lyneham was to be closed due to major restructuration plans of the MoD, the government set the final closure date for the air base and announced that all flights were to stop in September 2011. This also affected the repatriation flights and it meant that the repatriation rituals in Wootton Bassett would come to an end. The press reacted with surprise and the *Daily Mail* (13/12/2010) spun the story explaining that the new repatriation route would 'avoid' Wootton Bassett and 'deny the dead their final tribute' in the town. The satirical magazine the *Private Eye* (December 2010, page 23) ridiculed the panic expressed in the media over the loss of this 'new tradition' by making references to conspiracy theories. Whereas the route change had sparked a lot of surprised comments in the media, it had been long known by officials and locals that a closure was imminent. Yet, it was not clear at all what would happen to the repatriation rituals, or what the future of Lyneham would bring after the RAF left.

Early in January 2011, the *Swindon Advertiser* (06/01/2011) picked up on the mood within the town: 'Some relatives of British soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan have reacted angrily to the plans, but Anne Bevis, the repatriation liaison officer and treasurer of the Wootton Bassett Royal British Legion, thinks the change could be a good opportunity.' After all, no one had ever anticipated the events that had been unfolding since April 2007. Maybe, Anne explained, this would give the town's people another place a chance to do their thing (*SA* 06/01/2011). Even if this was never said explicitly, I can only imagine that the numerous repatriations, and all that was related to them, had put an enormous strain and responsibility on the town and those individual locals who gave up a considerable amount of their free time to ensure that everything went smoothly.

Wootton Bassett, 'Royal' to be

Following the announcement of RAF Lyneham's closure, the Prime Minister invited the town's civic leaders to Number 10 and behind closed doors discussed with them the end of the repatriation era for the town and how this could be celebrated (*SA* 21/01/2011). David Cameron was also the MP for RAF Brize Norton and the town of Carterton in Oxfordshire that was to receive the repatriation flights from September 2011. In March 2011, Cameron announced in the House of Commons, during Prime Minister's Questions, that the Queen had agreed to grant Wootton Bassett the title 'Royal' once the repatriation ceremonies in the town had come to an end. *The Guardian* marked this with the headline 'Loyal Wootton Bassett to

become Royal Wootton Bassett' (16/03/2011) and, while explaining that the people of Wootton Bassett had long rejected the idea of being honoured, the Mayor, Mary Champion (2010-2011), was quoted accepting this honour with great gratitude.

After years of rejecting all kinds of suggested honours, this was a complete u-turn by the town's elected leaders, but their explanations made it clearer what had prompted them to change their minds. Their main issue had been that any honour to the town would have taken away from the respect and honour they wanted to pay to the soldiers and their families. Once the repatriations were moved to a different place, Wootton Bassett's responsibility towards them was over and to accept this honour in retrospect seemed to be much more suitable, as the townsfolk would not appear to have done what they did for the attention which it brought them. Second, which is perhaps the more interesting point, they explained that they had always been afraid of being used to further political agendas. This honour, although it was announced by the Prime Minister, came in the shape of a royal decree from the Queen, who was not considered political. The comments of leaders of Wootton Bassett's community make this very clear. A local pastor said to *The Guardian* (16/03/2011): 'I think the town will see it as a gift, not from the government, but from the Queen, and that will please them greatly.' Similarly, the *Daily Telegraph* (16/03/2011) quoted Anne Bevis: 'Obviously this is quite an honour. We will accept it with good grace because it has been granted by the Queen.'

As might be expected, there was also some critical response, from people who took offence at the fact that all these honours appeared to mask the terrible consequences of this war. For example, Steve Bell, staff cartoonist for *The Guardian*, who had picked up the topic before, in 2009, made his controversial comment about the royal accolade in the newspaper on 18/03/2011:



Image 1: 'Afghan coffins' by Steve Bell, 15/07/2009 (Source: www.belltoons.co.uk)



Image 2: 'The war on language' by Steve Bell, in *The Guardian* 18/03/2011.

Summer 2011: the end of Wootton Bassett's repatriations

The summer of 2011 marked the slow wind-down of operations at RAF Lyneham and a last farewell flypast of the Hercules planes over the town centre in June was an emotional moment for many. Bidding farewell to the regular cortèges of coffins being driven through their High Street, however, was not as hard. It promised a return to some degree of normality. Yet, the town's face had changed for good. On 31 August 2011, the townspeople and invited guests came

together in the centre of the town by the War Memorial in the evening to ceremonially mark the end of their repatriation duty. Finishing as they had started, with an improvised ritual, the town's leaders had put together a short, solemn sunset ceremony to accompany the lowering of the Union Flag in the middle of the square. The flag was then folded and kept in St. Bartholomew and All Saints church over night in a candlelight vigil. The next day, the morning of 1 September 2011, the flag and a group of representatives of, and other guests from, Wootton Bassett travelled to Carterton, the small town just outside RAF Brize Norton, which, from then on, would receive the repatriation flights.

The Town Clerk and I had long a conversation reflecting on these ceremonies and how he came up with the elements of the Sunset Ceremony, inspired by similar military rituals:

Johnathan: ...And the question came back to us about: how do we actually do the transfer? And I don't know why... but actually I was sat in there, and I hadn't really thought about it beforehand, but I sat in this meeting and I said to them about the flag... Because we've had a flag gifted to us, and a flagpole, gifted to us, and I suggested that the flag that comes down at half-mast here, we could present that to the people of Oxfordshire and we could actually take it down off the flagpole here, transport it to Oxfordshire and they could fly it... So that the flag that is flown at the last repatriation in Wootton Bassett is the same flag that is flown at the first repatriation in Oxfordshire.

Aline: What does the flag symbolise in this case?

Johnathan: It is a symbolism of our respect. For military personnel it is a very powerful symbol as well. So it was a symbolic gesture to do that, to use the same flag. Now, when we were first looking at this, we thought that the ceremony here would be a morning ceremony and we would bring the flag down and take it over to Brize in the afternoon, and then they'd fly it in the afternoon. As it turned out, for a variety of reasons, the people in Oxfordshire wanted to actually fly the flag at eleven o'clock. They said, you know, they felt eleven o'clock was a symbolic time; it's a time of remembrance, isn't it?

Aline: Yeah...

Johnathan: ...so the eleventh hour. They wanted to fly their flag at eleven o'clock, so that was what they wanted to do. It was put to me: do you have any objections to that? Because that's what we'd like to do. And I was very happy to say 'You know, yeah of course, there's no problem at all with that.' I said, 'We'll hold our ceremony the night before.' So the minute I knew I was dealing with ours the night before, it was, for me, it was an easy thing: it was a Sunset Ceremony! I had been privileged to go to RAF Lyneham and see them do a sunset ceremony and I thought it worked.

Aline: Is there... sorry, is there a thing about Sunset Ceremonies...?

Johnathan: In military establishments, what happens is, at a Sunset Ceremony... The flag is lowered at night and then it's raised again...

Aline: Ah, I see...

Johnathan: ...the next morning, you see.

Aline: It makes so much more sense now...

Johnathan: It sort of makes sense. So, it was perfect from our point of view to do it at sunset. It was... it actually very... it works much better than trying to do it in the morning. So it was a Sunset Ceremony. So we set about organising a Sunset Ceremony. What I then did was, I think, one of my master strokes, was I went across and spoke to my friend [name] at RAF Lyneham [laughing] I said: 'I need your help!' And the man is a genius, he's a wonderful gentleman! [He] came over and I said, 'Right, I want a sunset ceremony like the one that I saw you organise [laughing].' And it was like that. He said, 'OK, here's the component parts...' So we started working on how we could actually do it but make it civilians doing it, not... um... not, not, military people you see. There are differences.

...//...

Well, we took the basics of the... [my friend at RAF Lyneham] came and said 'Right, if we had a sunset ceremony, this is what we would do', and he gave us a list of things where you might have a speech or not have a speech or whatever. And we took that and we knew that we could get the British Legion flag party to do the bit with the flag... we already, I already had... we've got an extraordinary brass band here that is really good. And the man who is at the head of it, Mathew Walton, who I, I would... he is has a musical ability, it makes you sing! Because, what happened was... three weeks... we didn't, you are supposed to have planned... You always have to remember that these things are not planned with years and years of planning; these things are put together quickly. The Sunset Ceremony was put together with probably less than three weeks notice, right? I went to Mathew Walton, who I think is an extraordinary cornet player, he plays Last Post at Remembrance Day. And I said to Mathew, I said 'Mathew, I want you to play at the sunset ceremony.' 'No problem, I can play Last Post.' 'I don't want you to play Last Post', says I. 'What do you mean?' I said, 'I have heard something on a CD and I want you to play this.' And I played him the CD. I hadn't got the music but it was the Evening Hymn and Sunset Ceremony piece, the Sunset Piece, where the flag comes down off the high note... I don't know if you've seen it, but it just sends a shiver down your spine. I... I got that clocked... I have always liked music, so music was easy for me. So, I got a CD with a band playing it and I said to Mathew, I said 'That's what I want. I want the flag coming down when you are playing the high notes as a single cornet player.' And he said, 'Oh, alright then, leave it with me. I'll go and talk to my mates in the Army and see if I can [incomprehensible] sure.' Not only three weeks later, he came up with the music for the band to play but, three weeks later, he played the sunset piece, a piece that he had never seen before, and he was brilliant. He played it to a world audience of I don't know how many million people. I mean it must have been the most nerve-wrecking thing he's ever done and he played it brilliantly. It was just spot on.

And it was just, to me... I think music ties into the emotion. And I think that was part of the organisation, was making sure the music tied into the emotion because music and emotion go together. And so it was the music that made the event work and his brilliant playing of it made everybody emotional. Because you hear the high note, that [tadadaaa... he's singing] and the flag is coming down, it really hits you there. And it's... that was it!

In his account of how they tried to find a way to mark the end of the repatriation events in their town Jonathan picks up on the themes we have already visited in Chapter 5. Partly as a contingency (due to the timing) and partly based on his social network and his cultural repertoire of military and civilian rituals, a bricolage was created of practices that were symbolically meaningful. What struck me most of all was how the theme of the flag connected all elements of the four-and-a-half years of repatriation rituals; they shrouded the coffins, they are taken off and presented to the families to keep as a memento and, during the handover ceremonies between Wootton Bassett and Carterton, the flag was treated like a dead body itself. It was lowered as the sun disappeared and night fell, a candlelight vigil – a wake of sorts - was held for it in the church over night for people to attend. In a way, this one flag used for the Sunset Ceremony stood for all the flags that had passed through this town shrouding all those bodies in their wooden boxes, like a thread of continuity in the course of events. And in the morning, the flag was draped over the arms of two civic leaders from Carterton as if to bind them with it and through it to their promise to take over the repatriation ritual duty, before it received a new life high up on Carterton's flag pole.

Carterton's town and county councils and the local British Legion chapter had been preparing for this moment. RAF Brize Norton now had a new repatriation terminal for the families and had built a new gate, Britannia Gate, as a side exit for the cortèges. The town itself could not receive the hearses due to its road layout, so an area on the outskirts of Carterton had been remodelled as a 'Memorial Garden' and was from then on to be the centre of the public repatriation ceremonies. From the beginning, talks between municipal representatives of Carterton and Wootton Bassett made it clear that the original tribute could not be copied, but that Carterton wanted a ceremonial response to the repatriations to continue in a simplified form. On the morning of the handover, a public ceremony with high-ranking military and the Prime Minister saw the Union Flag being hoisted in its new location. Then, the crowds, including standard bearers of the British Legion and some bikers, gathered for the first repatriation, to pay their respects and observe a minute's silence as the hearses passed before them.

Thus concluded the repatriation rituals in Wootton Bassett, and an (short) era of improvised and community-led practices to remember the war dead. On October 16 2011, with all the pomp and pride that might be expected, Wootton Bassett received the Queen's letters patent, making their royal status official. This day was, unlike any of the repatriations, all about the display of flag-waving patriotism. It did not just mark the end of four-and-a-half years of unwavering efforts of

this small community to keep their tribute in its original spirit; it also marked the end of this research project.

Chapter 7: The ‘Wootton Bassett Effect’

What ritual does

On the very day the era of repatriations through Wootton Bassett came to an end, when the ceremonial baton (or in this case a Union Jack flag) was handed over to the authorities of Carterton, I drove to London to meet filmmaker Henry Singer. Known for his award-winning documentaries, he was commissioned by the BBC to make a film about the repatriations, *Wootton Bassett: The Town That Remembers*, which was first aired in February 2010. Soon after the interview started, we were discussing what the repatriation rituals had been about and what they had meant to different people. Henry explained that when he had been asked to make this film, he had started by doing research on what people had already published about it and had come across a BBC Radio 4 programme (sociologist Laurie Taylor’s *Thinking Allowed*), which discussed the phenomenon with two social scientists. He recalled: ‘It was an example for me where people come at something with preordained ideas and she [one of the discussants in the show] had clearly never actually been to Wootton Bassett because the ideas were ...//... the kind of ideas I might have come to, started, without experiencing it.’ As discussed in the previous chapter, these preordained ideas, as he called them, were examples of labels that the media and other actors imposed on the ceremony, the townspeople and their motivations for the tribute. As outside views or versions of the events, many people from Wootton Bassett itself felt that they did not – and indeed could not – fully grasp the real story. They also felt that it was their responsibility not to allow the media, politicians or other outsiders to gain control over their local tribute by tarring it with the brush of their own agenda-following or -setting narratives.

Henry Singer played his own part in this process of meaning-making around the repatriation ritual. Like me, he came in as an outside observer, talked to locals, listened to their stories and then selected the parts he wanted to present in his documentary, a film without commentary. When he did his research for the film, he found that the repatriations brought together many different topics of discussion, groups of people and feelings. I asked him, ‘What’s the grand narrative of the film, the story of it?’ He answered, ‘Well, the story of the film is the repatriation; the subject is the whole Wootton Bassett tribute. But what it’s about is these much deeper themes and they all connect! ...//... I think one of the things the film tries to do is show the baggage that people bring to the High Street.’ The themes he mentioned will be at the core of the following pages. I shall discuss the link between the ritual as a collective performance and the

individual ‘baggage’ that people bring with them, in order to explain how ritual allows actors to celebrate community in an ambiguous, yet defined, space that permits of a shared experience of social values.

This last chapter also serves as a concluding discussion of the research presented in this thesis. In contrast to Henry Singer’s ‘documentary without commentary’ (a misleading description, if you ask me), this chapter will be my sociological commentary on this ethnography. In the introduction to Chapter 6, I explained that I think it is important to analyse ritualisation, the strategic redefinition of practice, from three different angles: (1) what people do, (2) what people say they do and (3) what ritual does. The first two have been dealt with in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 respectively. The third angle – what ritual does – is the concern of the following pages and will be a reflection on some of the effects of Wootton Bassett’s repatriation ritual, analysed from a sociological point of view. These are the questions, puzzles and interesting phenomena that grabbed people’s attention, the essence that made the repatriations both famous and ‘successful’ (at least for as long as the ritual lasted). Although the paragraphs below can only give us a small glimpse of the complexity of the social processes at stake, they cover a range of topics aiming at understanding the link between the individual and the collective, i.e. examining the repatriation ritual at the intersections of individual, interactional and institutional orders (cf. Jenkins 2002). After all, this, as I keep telling my students, is what sociology is about.

Community

Over the years, the townspeople’s relationship to the repatriation cortèges had always been multifaceted, a relationship that was, in a way, channelled and managed through the ritual that had developed. More than anything, the repatriations had brought people from the town together on a regular basis. It had offered them the space, time and occasion to experience and perform community, without necessarily having to spell it out what it means to them. For most towns of a comparable size, a feeling of community may come up every now and then, for example when the rival town’s football team is being played, or perhaps during yearly local festivities such as carnivals, well dressings or historical festivals. At best, such events happen a handful of times every year. Wootton Bassett’s inhabitants, however, were reminded of their shared identity as a community, not only during every single repatriation, but also every time they were addressed as ‘the townspeople’ of the town that paid its respects. The events of 2007-2011 offered the town the opportunity to experience itself, perform community and consolidate

its boundaries – be it in the juxtaposition between the local and the national, or in those moments when they gathered together on the High Street, chatting and waiting for the hearses to arrive.

Johnathan Bourne, the Town Clerk, and I talked about the social aspect of meeting for the ritual during our interview. He said:

People commented about this a few times... As a town, we were one of the few towns that has had the opportunity of meeting every week. And there was an element of that about it. There was... the atmosphere before a repatriation was very different to the atmosphere during the repatriation...

Aline: And after...?

Johnathan: Yeah... well after, nah well. Well I think, yeah, three different things. Well beforehand, you had a sense of people coming together. They were all... of the sense of some comradeship, camaraderie amongst people, um, meeting old friends. Actually, it was sort of a social gathering in one way; it had that feel to it. [He pauses carefully] And that says – it's peculiar now when you are there to pay your respects – but actually there was definitely that feeling of a social gathering. Once the bell started to toll, it would then very much go to silence and people would be with their own thoughts then and it would be a very sombre, and I always thought very moving, occasion. If you were at the War Memorial, I never failed to be moved by it. It was always very touching I thought, very sad, profoundly sad. And afterwards...

Aline: So after the 'dismiss'...

Johnathan: After the 'dismiss', I think the fact that people thought... your thoughts were still with you and then people drifted away and there wasn't a return to the camaraderie and that. That didn't happen. Because everybody was in sombre... it... it's... my experience of it

Since the interview with Johnathan took place after the repatriation flights had moved to Brize Norton, I had the chance to ask him to reflect on whether anything had changed for the town. The social aspect of the regular rituals is the one thing he mentioned instantly:

So for us... I'd... when you ask me now have things changed, the thing that changed was that you don't meet people in the High Street anymore. But other than that, there's no great change. The town has sort of settled back down to a sense of normality and you know... people get on with their lives. The country as a whole? I don't know.

The British Legion's Repatriation Officer from Wootton Bassett, Anne Bevis, had been in contact with many visitors and she makes a similar point about how coming together on a repatriation day has had an effect on those who attended, some of them regularly, others only once: '... it actually provokes a lot of friendship, comradeship... especially amongst the veterans.'

The ritual, which so clearly divided those who attended into different groups, with their different spaces and ceremonial roles (see Chapter 4), offered more than a common denominator for all those who attended. It also allowed these particular small groups to (re-)establish themselves and to negotiate their identities, internally and externally. The bikers are a prime example. It was fascinating to observe how this rather nondescript subgroup of the British Legion, which had only been founded in 2005, started to find (or create?) a purpose and identity within the repatriation ritual, and the Legion, during the time covered by this research. Consisting mainly of ex-military men in their forties, i.e. the generation of veterans before the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, they did not quite fit into the role of the typical veteran, or receive any mention or respect for the time they served, be it in the Balkans, in Northern Ireland, the Falklands or the Gulf War. The War Memorial in Wootton Bassett reflects this, too, since, even when it was erected in 2004, the only names that were chosen to appear on the memorial were those of the soldiers who died during the two world wars. Partly because she was influenced by King's study of MoD obituaries (2010), this is unfortunately one of the things that Danilova (2015: 268), in her otherwise interesting article on the politics of mourning, got quite wrong:

The impressive Armed Forces Memorial was unveiled in 2007 at the National Memorial Arboretum in North Staffordshire. In the same year, another new war memorial was unveiled on the main street of the village Royal Wotton Bassett [*sic*] in Wiltshire, a place which became synonymous with the returning of the bodies of British soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan. These two memorials do not distinguish between the fatalities of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, arguably demonstrating that 'neither the majority of the British public nor the media have distinguished between the treatment of the dead of either theatre' (King, 2010: 4).

Wootton Bassett, neither a village nor royal at the time, did not, indeed, distinguish between the two operational theatres, although only when it came to showing respect to the dead servicepeople whose coffins passed through their High Street. Nor did it matter how these men and women died, which is a topic I will discuss further below. How the image, perception and definition of the typical 'veteran' are changing, however, is an interesting field of research that should be pursued further.

Dramatisation of grief

The focus on grief and heartbreakingly emotional stories is another pattern I observed when analysing the media's reporting on Wootton Bassett's repatriations. Throughout the newspaper genres, articles diverted from a typical (more or less) objective reporting style; on many

occasions, the repatriation ritual was set in a dramatised scene that rendered the described emotions almost tangible for the reader. Simultaneously, many photos and videos from the events on the High Street used in the news zoomed in on the coffins and the families that placed their flowers on the hearses, breaking down in tears and comforting each other. Exacerbating the effect, the addition of audio could focus a scene to the solemn tolling of the bell and the suppressed noises from grieving families. It was gripping, and the intended effect of presenting written accounts, pictures and sounds in such a way clearly to trigger emotions in the audience. As the *Swindon Advertiser* (14/07/2009) wrote in its dramatic account of the biggest repatriation event: ‘The loud sobs of those left behind resonated in the High Street as the grief-stricken clambered through the crowd to throw flowers on to the hearses carrying their loved ones’. Less obviously, but similarly aimed at its readers’ soft spots, *The Guardian* (14/07/2009) conjured up an omniscient narrator to report from the same event: ‘Veterans, uniformed soldiers, leather-clad bikers and the general public were touched by anger and pride. There was anger at the age of the soldiers dying and the absence of a government minister to see them return, and pride at the servicemen’s role in a war to tackle terrorism.’

These portrayals of feelings of anger, pride and grief were echoed in many other sources. Even the BBC’s documentary fully indulged in the sadness of it all, zooming in on the public outpouring of private emotions by the families and others. The film, for example, followed one woman who having lost her own son in Afghanistan, had ever since attended the repatriations of others who had suffered the same fate. For her, and no doubt many others, attending repatriation after repatriation made her re-live her own loss again and again. The same goes for a Wootton Bassett resident who had lost his brother in the Korean War and who was shown in the documentary reduced to tears over the memory of his loss. The filmmaker, Henry Singer, commented on this aspect of the ritual and the way every single individual seemed to bring his or her own emotional baggage with them:

I think one of the things the film tries to do is show the baggage that people bring to the High Street. So when Bert comes to the High Street for a repatriation, he’s just not coming to shake hands. He’s carrying the grief of his brother Tom; he is carrying that sense of loss. And I wanted the film to reveal in a sense the sacrifice of the people that turn in week in week out to the High Street, because everybody is carrying a sense of loss. You know, Ken lost friends, Ken lost his first life... You come to that kind of event, it’s a very emotional moment, and it’s because you’re in a sense grieving for your own losses on that day. That... in a wordless way, this is what I thought the film is about. So if you say what’s the subject to me... it’s... or what’s the story... it’s easy.

A shop assistant who was interviewed by the *Swindon Advertiser* (SA 22/05/09) described how she empathised with the families present at the ritual:

Every time you see a hearse go past it is absolutely devastating. You'd think by now we would get used to it but it gets worse and worse each time. I had a tear in my eye today. It's so sad to see family grieving as the coffin moves past and it reminds you that it's not just another soldier, but someone's brother or father or son. My father served... I know how much people have to sacrifice to fight for their country and I feel that coming down here is the least we can do to show our respect for what they do.

Mayor Steve Bucknell (2009-2010) explains how the direct exposure to the families' emotions affects others (SA 14/07/09):

What makes it so much sadder is when you see the friends and family of the fallen and it brings it home that these are real people with real lives – someone's son, grandson, brother and father. They are going to leave a hole in many lives.

Everyone seems to be able to relate to the idea of loss and grief in their own personal way, some more, some less. For some, it is simply sad to think of the age of many of these soldiers. In many quotes used in newspaper articles, people interviewed on the High Street referred to the dead as 'boys' or 'babies', and the common image people seemed to have was one of a very young man, who had not even had a chance to start his life yet. This notion is no doubt a rather romantic one, which not only ignores the fact that quite a few of those repatriated were women, but also that they were adults, deemed grown-up enough to carry a gun and make decisions of life and death.

What is important here, however, is that the shrouded, flag-draped coffin made it possible people to fill the space inside with whatever idea of the dead fitted their understandings of the world. Jenkins *et al.* (2012: 361) seem to come to a similar conclusion in their study about Wootton Bassett and the 'political spaces of remembrance', arguing that:

...the Wootton Bassett repatriations honoured the dead without speeches, claims or slogans, allowing mourners, onlookers and commentators to imbue them with their divergent meanings: personal grief, respect for the military, anger at government underfunding of the Forces, and opposition to or support of UK foreign policy.

This was a ritual performance of shared values and feelings that engaged people who attended or even watched from afar in the idea of an empathic communion. 'This turnout shows it's not just us as families that feel that, but also the whole nation', said one mourner in an interview with *The Guardian* (14/07/2009). For others, it was not necessarily an expression of the 'nation' but of people from all over feeling the same. A resident of Argyll, Scotland, wrote to the Mayor in July 2009: 'I watch their moving respect on the television with tears streaming down my face'. Thus,

one did not even have to be physically present on the High Street to feel the effects. Similarly, this woman from Bristol described, in a letter sent to the town in September 2009, how the coverage on the television created a powerful atmosphere:

I have – sadly – seen the news coverage of the hearses on their journey, and it's always a sad and moving thing to watch, but (and please don't take this the wrong way as I mean no disrespect) it's good to see the soldiers coming home. In the article it mentions that the atmosphere on repatriation days gets very charged, and I felt very emotional earlier in the year when five soldiers were brought home on the same day. I know the atmosphere from watching coverage on the TV would have been nothing compared to the atmosphere actually there on the day, but it was the most moving sight I have ever seen, and unashamedly brought tears to my eyes.

From a sociological point of view, the interesting effect of this phenomenon is that individuals with different backgrounds and links to the events seem to manage to relate to the repatriations in their own personal ways and, through that, experience the essence of collectivity. Emotions are quintessentially felt and lived in the personal and individual sphere; yet different elements in the repatriation rituals brought people together in their individuality, while at the same time creating this collective experience. To a large extent, empathy for those who suffered a personal loss played a big role in this process. But without the public ritualisation of this personal sense of bereavement, there would have been no way to engage in it as a collective. The ritual gave people a specific time, place and ordered way to experience these feelings, both individually and collectively, whilst framing them in practice and in discourse. It tied the deaths into a story, made them relevant through paying respect and talking about heroism and sacrifice.

As the Town Clerk described it, the repatriation ritual was put together and managed in Wootton Bassett in a 'bumbling' and 'ramshackle' manner. This was very powerful in itself; the repatriations did not have the feel of a tightly-organised state-consecrated ceremony, and the symbolism, practices and labels that were used stayed simple and open, allowing for space and ambiguity within. The symbol of the coffins shrouded in the Union Flag, for example, afforded both collective and individual imaginations sufficient leeway to act on each other. Cohen (1985: 21) explains very well the power of ambiguous symbols:

Symbols are effective because they are imprecise. Though obviously not contentless, part of their meaning is 'subjective'. They are, therefore, ideal media through which people can speak a 'common' language, behave in apparently similar ways, participate in the 'same' rituals, pray to the 'same' gods, wear similar clothes, and so forth, without subordinating themselves to a tyranny of orthodoxy. Individuality and commonality are thus reconcilable.

He continues, a little later on: 'it is probably the very opportunity they afford their participants to assimilate the symbolic forms to their individual and idiosyncratic experience and social and emotional needs that makes them so compelling and attractive.' (Cohen 1985: 53).

As I have documented in the past chapter, the ritual of the repatriation ceremonies and its sudden publicity in mid-2009 had also attracted critical voices. It was not the town's show of respect that was criticised, rather, the 'morbid engagement' with and 'mawkish' interest in the families' grief (Walklate *et al.* 2011: 160). Some called it a 'Diana-style tear fest' (*Daily Mirror* 07/01/2010) and blamed the visitors for being 'grief tourists'. *The Independent* (18/07/2009) attacked the events for their 'alarming whiff of mass sentimentality'; what the author is so concerned about is that the public appeared to take on a blinkered view over these deaths:

What is odd is that, behind the emotion of the moment, there is still remarkably little understanding of, and not much curiosity about, the cause for which these men have sacrificed their lives. If those applauding the coffins of dead soldiers were asked whether they really thought the soldiers had given their today for our tomorrow, few would answer with an unequivocal 'yes'. The reason these men died has become less important than the fact of their death. (*The Independent* 18/07/2009)

Personally, I agree with this journalist. When I first went to Wootton Bassett to attend a repatriation, it was with very mixed feelings. Having grown up in Germany, I am fairly uncomfortable with masses joining in collective rituals, throwing around vocabulary of heroism and a 'nation', when the reality of these wars is very different and rather complex. In retrospect, however, I can see how it was the ritual framework that allowed people to deal with these ambiguous notions, the deaths and the mixed feelings. Whenever I tried, like *The Independent's* reporter, to find out what made people show up on the High Street or keep the ritual up, I did not get a clear answer. People talked to me about their own stories, what being there during the ritual made them feel, and every single one said that they were 'simply paying their respects'. But respect for what?

The key to understanding this, I believe, is that the answer to this question hardly matters. It would be wrong to believe that all these people who gathered again and again could not make sense of what they did. The opposite is true, and the fact is that *it simply made sense*. It just fitted, it was right. Anything else would have felt odd. As discussed in Chapter 5, it used to be normal in Britain (and for many this still is the norm) that when one sees a hearse, one stops and 'pays respect'. And the same holds true for honouring the fallen. Therefore, it was no surprise that the

people who happened to witness the first regular repatriation in Wootton Bassett would do what they did, as James Gray, the local MP, told me:

The reason why it started was that the route from RAF Lyneham to the coroner in the hospital in the Royal Infirmary in Oxford goes down Wootton Bassett High Street. And so it would have been odd had we not paid our respects to the coffins going down the High Street. It has always been a great tradition in this country that if you see a hearse going by you take your hat off – that has always been that way. And it could be that people of Wootton Bassett just feel that actually having coffins driven down the High Street and not being paying attention to it would be wrong. And so they just stopped to pay respects.

At the same time, I can also understand how many commentators on the repatriation ritual felt the need to dig deeper, to unearth ulterior motives or messages in what they observed in Wootton Bassett. Both they and I questioned the ‘clean’ labels that the town’s key actors tried so hard to sell to the public, and repeated over and over again like a mantra. In a similar vein, and just as questionable, were the attempts by outside actors to use the local effort for their own ends and turn it into something it had never claimed to be.

This brings me back to the way I split up the analysis of ritualisation into three different parts: what people do, what they say they do, and what ritual does. The negotiations over the meaning and interpretations of ritual practices are an ongoing process, one that, in the case of Wootton Bassett’s repatriations, kept changing form over the course of the four years of the repatriations. And the practice itself, inspired by cultural repertoires, coincidences and improvisation, adapted and morphed alongside.

The last issue that I shall discuss in the light of this much commented-on ‘dramatisation of grief’ is whether there is a new trend. Is grief ‘in’? Some writers have certainly suggested this in the case of Britain but also in the light of high-profile deaths of individuals or larger groups abroad. *The Guardian* (Politics Blog 11/09/2009¹) even talked about ‘the pornography of grief’, throwing the public discourse about Wootton Bassett, the obsession with poppies, and the deaths of Princess Diana and Jade Goody into the same pot. The author explains:

We have so little experience of death nowadays that we have forgotten how to handle it. ...//... Thus the human impulse – sympathy – which prompted the citizens of Wootton Bassett in Wiltshire to pause as military coffins passed through the town from nearby RAF Lyneham started out well enough, decent to the core. But it became larger and

¹ *The Guardian*, Politics Blog, ‘The pornography of grief – and the devalued poignancy of the poppy’, posted on 11th November, 2009. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/2009/nov/11/pornography-of-grief-popy-michael-white> (accessed July 2015).

sleeker with every passing day, the coverage growing, too. ...//... My own view is that when people, especially private citizens, start to cry during interviews the cameras should be switched off to allow them a moment to recover. It's private and it isn't fair to exploit their feelings about a loss. In fact, it's voyeuristic and unhealthy. (*The Guardian* 11/09/2009)

Since the 1990s, a strong sociological current has developed which investigates the social and cultural perspectives of public death, grief and funeral (cf. Walter 2008a, 2008b, 2007, 2006, 1994). The case of Diana, Princess of Wales, who died in an accident in 1997, is a heavily-cited example of how the death of an individual was mourned by the masses in public displays of grief and emotion that felt untypical for the British people.

It was an occasion when members of the public made their need for visible emotional expression paramount, the restrained, stiff upper lip of the nineteenth century being explicitly overthrown as a result of popular opinion (Katz 2001: 271)

This event, as well as others like the school shooting in Dunblane in 1996, the Hillsborough disaster in 1989 or the sinking of the Estonia in 1994, gave rise to debates about the need of collective mourning, the media's role in it and new ways of publicly expressed grief, the extent of which is too great to discuss here in detail. A very good summary of the discussion is found in Patrick West's book *Conspicuous Compassion* (2004) from which comes the following excerpt:

No wonder we are given to crying in public. And no wonder we seek to do so collectively. Ostentatious caring allows a lonely nation to forge new social bonds. Additionally, it serves as a form of catharsis. Its most visible manifestation is the habit of coming together to cry over the death of celebrities or murdered children. We saw this at its most ghoulish after the demise of Diana, Princess of Wales. In truth, the mourners were not crying for her, but for themselves. These deaths serve as an opportunity to (in)articulate our own unhappiness, and, by doing so in public, to form new social ties to replace those that have disappeared. (West 2004: 4)

With respect to Wootton Bassett, the media's 'dramatisation of grief' quickly conjured up a comparison with the emotional display after Diana's death, prompting many to talk about the 'Diana-effect', now turned 'Wootton Bassett effect', as this example from an interview with the local MP, James Gray, illustrates:

Well, I think that's beyond my pay grade but it seems to me that the Wootton Bassett story is incredibly simple and straightforward. More complex, not that I am an academic, more complex is the effect that the 'Wootton Bassett effect' had on the rest of the world. I mean, there is a... I don't know if you recall, you are probably too young... when Princess Diana was killed, there was an extraordinary outpouring of emotion in a very un-British sort of way and acres and acres of flowers and... and astonishing kind of emotion. And that is rather similar in some ways... what effect did that have? What does that say in a change in the British psyche? I mean we have always been stiff upper lip and we don't... we don't get more than that kind of thing and you know... and... you know, in both First World War and Second World War, a million people were killed, with

nothing like the same degree of emotional outpouring that there has been over Wootton Bassett or the Princess of Wales. So... is this symbolic of some kind of change of the British psyche? Are we less stiff upper lip than we used to be? Who knows?

A blogger expressed his perplexion about the public outpour of grief as he described the repatriation of a local soldier's body:

The night before his body was brought back to the UK, thousands of people in his home town near Kirby, near Liverpool held an event where hundreds of chinese lanterns were sent into the night sky in his memory. I am not sure whether I am with this, I would not want to deny any show of appreciation for the dead man and his family, but why does society now go for these mawkish, over emotional displays. The "Diana" effect lives on. Thousands of people couldn't have known this man, what is it all about? (Mellor View 2011) [*sic*]

And he is right, they couldn't have, but maybe they could relate and empathise. Maybe with the families who lost their son or daughter, husband or wife, mum or dad, sister or brother. Maybe they were upset that such a young person had died in a senseless war far away. Maybe they thought it was important to make the effort to publicly show their respect and support; or maybe the emotional atmosphere felt 'contagious'. Whatever individual reasons people had, the ritual allowed them, both on the High Street and from a distance, to come together in and through a repetitive collective performance of community. Ambiguously open symbols and the lack of (obvious) firm management left the repatriation ritual as simple and community-led as it had started. It allowed people to connect emotionally on an individual and collective level and acted as an outlet for emotions.

Heroism, the nation and the people

In 2014, I met a fellow climber, Jonny, in Sheffield one of whose friends had died in Afghanistan and been repatriated through Wootton Bassett on 20th November, 2009. Even though I had not planned to interview anyone directly affected by the deaths, Jonny volunteered to talk about his experience of attending the repatriation ritual, as he felt the need to reflect on the events. What struck him the most, he explained, is how death in action could all of a sudden transform how a soldier was perceived in the public:

And suddenly the word is not 'squaddie', it's 'hero'. And you go to Colchester Barracks, you go to Colchester, which is a barracks town, the idea of a squaddie is someone who causes a fuckload of fuss on Friday night when they get a pass at the barracks, glasses people, gets pissed, sexual assault, rape charges, angry young men, squaddies, you know, scum of the earth, jarhead haircuts but... we put them through the machine of Afghanistan and Iraq and for as long as they die or lose a limb they come back a hero. Oh I can't grasp this concept!

Jonny is right – what makes a hero? Discourses about heroism with regard to the loss of life in Iraq and Afghanistan were omnipresent, from the titles of news reports, to the comments of family members or people attending the ritual, to the names of charitable organisations like ‘Afghan Heroes’ or ‘Help for Heroes’. Even my local supermarket sold fundraising egg cartons ‘for heroes’¹. From the beginning, I asked myself what people saw as acts of heroism and how the changed role of the soldier in today’s professional armies affected (or didn’t) the way the military deaths were perceived. Wootton Bassett’s Town Clerk, Johnathan Bourne, also reflected on the notion of heroism and the diverse realities behind some of the deaths of the soldiers that were repatriated through the town:

It’s one of the interesting ones, I mean you might want to reflect on this... There was a young soldier that died in a boating accident in Cyprus on his way back and he was repatriated through the town. Now that wasn’t killed in action, it was an accident, but he was still afforded the same respect [incomprehensible] that all of his colleagues have been. And the other one I am reminded of is a soldier who, I think, had not exactly committed suicide but he had wandered off in the night and it had all got too much for him. And again he was afforded exactly the same respect [incomprehensible]. There was no variation in that. There was no judgement made about... oh this person does deserve it, this person doesn’t, that was never the case. And that might be something you might want to reflect upon when you look at it. The other one I was interested in was something that never happened, which was the journalist that died. There was a journalist that died and he did come back through the town but he was brought back through the town in a non-marked van, nobody was ever told when it happened. We weren’t told till afterwards. And I know that there were a number of people who had said to me that they would have liked their respect to the journalist to show, as a mark of respect for what he was doing, which was trying to enlighten people about the war. In a way they still thought he was doing his duty. I know it sounds funny but in a way he was still doing his duty. His professional duty was to cover the war as a war correspondent and there were people who felt that he should have had that same level of respect, not everyone, I suspect, but there were a few. And that happened all very quickly because it... he was just brought through the town, not in a hearse in the way the MoD... So it was, that never happened in effect for us and he did come through but nobody was out because nobody knew. But people said afterwards, they said, well, we wished we had known because he was simply doing his job as well.

Between them, Jonny and Johnathan raise awkward questions and issues. What is the relationship between someone ‘simply doing their job’ and heroism? What are the changing perceptions of the military, and servicepeople, as a result of two wars that at best only enjoyed insecure popular legitimacy? These issues appear, as yet, to be unexamined by social scientists and are, ideally, a topic for further research.

¹ See: Help for Heroes’ campaign: <http://www.eggsforsoldiers.co.uk/>.

These issues do, however, return the discussion to a set of issues with which this thesis opened, about how nation-states – in this case the United Kingdom, in particular – deal with the memorialisation of conflict and those who die in the service of their country. Ever since their inception, commemoration practices and their meaning have changed over time. Right after the Great War, many of these ceremonies were used to raise awareness about the indifference for, and neglect of, veterans, who were often physically and mentally maimed, and those who had lost their family members in the war.

Today, remembrance has taken a rather grand and public form and during ‘poppy season’ (*The Guardian* Politics Blog November 2009), for some, ‘Remembrance Sunday has become a sacred cow of crabbed sentimentalism’ (Maconie 2011: 70). It becomes clear that, whatever else it is – and I have argued that it is many things – the memorialisation and commemoration of military deaths can never be anything but political, whether with a small or a big ‘p’. A conspicuous example of the politicisation – very definitely with a large ‘P’ – of memorialisation comes from Canada. The ‘Highway of Heroes’ was always about flag-waving nationalism. As Premier McGuinty reminded his audience during his unveiling speech on 7th September 2007:

The road that links Ontario and Quebec is named in honour of the two leaders who gave life to our young nation more than 140 years ago. It is enormously fitting, then, that we dedicate a portion of this very road in honour of those who gave their lives for our nation. (Ontario Regional Office 2007¹)

The repatriation ritual in the United Kingdom, however, was about the people of a small town, and about how this community, Wootton Bassett stood, as a small town *par excellence*, for all the other small towns and communities in the United Kingdom, where any John and Jane Doe would have done exactly the same thing. So, yes, the Wootton Bassett repatriation ritual also depended on the idea of a national community, but it defined itself in a very different way: not through territory, politics or flag-waving, but through core values of respect, honour and service. It was a celebration of the simple and the ordinary, the small and the local. An act of local altruism and national spirit. It was in these terms that Wootton Bassett resident Anne Bevis explicitly compared Canada’s approach to the local response to which she had contributed:

I think that... you know it’s... it’s probably the British way. They are reserved but one talks of... in the sort of situations. We are a funny crowd. ...//... Different countries have their different ways. When we were compared to Canada: they are much more outgoing. That’s their way of doing it. We didn’t feel like standing waving flags was quite the thing but they want to do that.

¹ News release from 7th September, 2007: <http://news.ontario.ca/opo/en/2007/09/highway-of-heroes-signs-unveiled-along-highway-401.html> (accessed July 2015).

At which point, one might well ask: what about the response to deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the very public repatriation of the resultant bodies, by the government and the military? Where was the state in all of this? This does not appear to be something that has ever been straightforward:

State-led collective expressions of grief have tended to wait until the conflict is over, at which stage the mourning can be diluted by the gratification of victory. But, as a result, they send a mixed message. Are they acts of mourning, and even contrition, or are they patriotic statements? (Schulman and Strachan 2010: 79)

History also makes the situation more complex: 'Britain has no grasp of how to mourn the soldier who has died in a war that is discredited by defeat' (Schulman and Strachan 2010: 79). A twentieth-century record of relatively unambiguous victories in major conflicts obscures the view and gets in the way of a clear-cut response to something more ambiguous; the 'war on terror' is, after all and almost by definition, not something that can be 'won'.

None of this passed unremarked on in Wootton Bassett. The introduction in 2000 of the Military Covenant had raised the public profile of the obligations that the state owed to its armed forces and their members. There was talk about the government being put under pressure by the events in Wootton Bassett and their popularity. Here is the Town Clerk again:

Oh yeah, I mean we heard some stories... The MoD had no experience because parts of the MoD who could see that it was adding to the morale and people could see they were being appreciated. But on the other hand, it has also drawn a lot of attention to what was a loss of life, which is something the MoD traditionally don't want to draw attention to. Don't want to start telling people, you know, join up the army, you might get shot! That's not the message that they want to send, is it really? So yeah we heard that there were mixed feelings really. But I have to say my personal experience with all contacts with the MoD were always very positive. Right through to some quite high-ranking generals who were nothing but appreciative and courteous towards us, that was the message...

The documentary filmmaker, Henry Singer, said something similar:

From my limited understanding, I don't think the MoD wasn't particularly interested... excited about Wootton Bassett... I think they, erm... but they realised it was a phenomenon they couldn't control so they might as well make the best of it. I don't think Wootton Bassett, it's a double-edged sword, because I don't... on some level, I don't think it's done them any favours. You know, images, night after night, week after week of the hearses, coffins coming off the planes and the hearses going through the High Street... There's no question, particularly in the summer of 2009 where there was so many losses, that couldn't help but build anti-war sentiment. They just... and I think they probably must have found that painful.

I asked James Gray, Conservative MP for North Wiltshire, who founded the All Party Group for the Army in 2004, and who represents Wootton Bassett at Westminster, whether the public perception of military death has changed:

And I think you are right in a sense that the Wootton Bassett effect has caught the public's imagination. ...//... I mean, yes, to a degree, the Wootton Bassett effect will have affected the perception of war deaths. Had Wootton Bassett not done it, somebody else would have done it, no doubt. ...//... and I think there is a much greater degree of, it's not sentimentality, a much greater degree of concern perhaps than there would have been in many previous conflicts. And Wootton Bassett perhaps is a, erm... an outpouring of that, an observation of that... Princess Diana mood. ...//... What is interesting is not the effect the repatriations had on Wootton Bassett, to which the answer is not a lot. Wootton Bassett is the same as before. The interesting question, not that I understand sociology very well, is the effect that Wootton Bassett events had on... Britain and the wider world and the military.

It is not all clear, however, that its MP's confident perception that 'Wootton Bassett is the same before' is accurate. If nothing else, its relationship with the abstraction that is the nation, England or Britain, may have changed. Perhaps the last word on this subject should belong to the Town Clerk:

Johnathan Bourne: But if we did anything... what we did was we just held a mirror up, didn't we really. We just... we allowed people to see, alright we did something, we stood there and paid some respect but... all we ended up doing was holding a mirror up to the society because people wanted to do that. People happened to have the opportunity to do that. I get shouted down when I sometimes say had this gone through any market town in the country it might have happened in the same way, some people don't believe that, I am not sure that's true, I don't know. I honestly don't know.

Aline: What did you mean by holding a mirror up to society?

Johnathan: People would want to pay their respects and they don't have an opportunity to do so. What we did in Wootton Bassett was we gave people here an opportunity to do so. And what the media did was they gave everybody an opportunity to share in that. Our initial view when the media first came was, we were a bit sniffy about that actually, we thought, you know, this is our thing we just want to just be left alone to pay our respects... And the media cottoned on with this, this is something bigger, this is something different, you know, because there is a lot of interest in this. And the media grew persistent and kept coming back and we then began to wake up to the fact that the media had gotten on to something here. And they... there was a value in the people all over the country seeing this because it allowed them to connect with it somehow and pay their own respects. And I think some of the letters that you have seen illustrate that actually. The letters we started to receive show that people were saying things like, you know, 'I wish I could have been there,' or, you know, 'you have done something that we had all wanted to do'. That's [incomprehensible] expression. And then, for me, the more powerful thing still was to receive some of the letters from serving soldiers who would then write in saying, and families as well from serving officers, who would be writing in saying, 'it means such a lot to see that level of respect being shown to our colleagues, to...' You know and something then [incomprehensible] you think on now, now it

matters a lot, then, in... certainly my view about the media changed in all this, I had begun to realise that that was what was happening that these pictures they were broadcasting out to Afghanistan and the soldiers that are out there were actually quite appreciative of what we did. I think that had the soldiers said that oh we don't want that to happen, I think, we wouldn't have gone around telling people to stop. You know but actually you suddenly realised then this mattered to them and they realised it was important and they appreciated it. And I remember there was a... I went to an event and there was... a brigadier came up to me and he had tears in his eyes but the fact that this is what was happening... and I thought that... I suddenly realised that you've connected somehow and... For us it's strange because it's just paying respect it's just... but then you realise it matters such a lot to other people. So I think that second part of your... thing about mattering to other people in the country is rather more so, I think. I think that's... I think they are different. I think what we have done is...we did it and it started simply and it grew from there. But its impact is... I could not believe the day that I was looking at the news and Barack Obama was there saying the town of Wootton Bassett [faking an American accent] represented the whole of British... [laughing] I think it was such a... you know the leader of the free world is suddenly pointing to us and saying that we are representing the best of British character, I thought, good grief! [laughing] That was a bit of a surreal moment!

What Johnathan is saying is that there were really several realities to the repatriation ritual. To begin with, there was of course the ritual practice that was performed on Wootton Bassett's High Street every time a repatriation cortège passed through. This was a collective performance rooted in a specific context, place and time. Each one of them was a little different and each one of them also followed the same basic pattern of understanding and action.

The second reality of the repatriations is more complicated: it is the one that was portrayed by the media, in text, photographs, video and audio recordings of the individual events. And even, perhaps, in this thesis. Broadcasting images of the flag-draped coffins and the grieving masses into people's living-rooms, or onto news screens¹ in banks, train stations, airports and other public buildings, conjured up the same emotions and empathic reactions in the onlookers that it did for many who experienced it 'live' on the High Street. A mirrored or reflected, and to some degree reduced but also enhanced, reality was created of the ritual, and the public in front of the screen could vicariously partake in the emotional communion and the dramatisation of grief in public.

The third reality of the ritual is the most removed and abstract; this is about how the concept or idea of the repatriations created and offered a platform for discussion or a 'discursive space' that allowed many different readings and interpretations of the performance. It could be linked to

¹ For some time, *BBC News* transmitted live footage from every repatriation directly from the High Street in Wootton Bassett. It ran as quiet footage in the background whilst other announcements were made.

Britishness, nationalism, values, duty and heroism, family values, large-scale political issues and small-scale community life. And because it could be, it was.

This thesis has explored two main themes. First, there is the set of issues about the nation, the military, civil society and death that I have just discussed, above. Second, there is the question of how does a ritual develop, how does it emerge from the myriad of practices that surround any 'ritualisable' event or sequence of events?

To revisit the discussion of ritualisation in closing, there are a number of points to emphasise about the Wootton Bassett repatriations. In the first place, this was a genuinely local phenomenon, the 'national' remained, as far as local perceptions were concerned, external throughout, albeit that the nation was undoubtedly and inevitably part of what was being dramatised. In the town, individuals responded as individuals, but out of their responses a shared community response emerged.

Next, the importance of chance and contingency should not be overlooked: the nature of the space through which the hearses had to pass, necessarily slowing down to do so, which both made them impossible to ignore and afforded a compact arena, with its own characteristics, within which to create a local response; the preceding campaign about Wootton Bassett having its own war memorial, which increased the visibility of commemoration and memorialisation in the town; the earlier repatriation in 2005, which further sensitised people to the situation; and the existing local ties to the military. Without these, it is not certain that the repatriation ritual would have evolved as it did.

Contingencies aside, there was definite orchestration and organisation, a lot of organisation by local elected representatives, officials and the British Legion, without which the ritual would certainly not have taken the shape that they did. The repatriation ceremonies did not just happen: they were social constructed as the situation developed, at the intersection of local knowledge about similar formal events in other contexts, concerns about ensuring that social order was maintained – one can see the ritual 'function' of simultaneously dramatising and managing heightened emotions at work – and, no less interestedly, local knowledge about what is and is not appropriate behaviour. With respect to the latter, people explained to me how natural it was: 'You stop for a funeral, that's just normal'. This was probably the ultimate 'social grit' around which the pearl of the ritual developed. In drawing on this locally shared bedrock of 'the

right thing to do' it clearly became impossible not to do something in response to the regular appearance of the dead on the High Street. It simply became imperative.

Appendix

Abbreviations

BBC British Broadcasting Corporation

BL The Royal British Legion

CNN The Cable News Network

MoD The Ministry of Defence

RAF The Royal Air Force

SA The Swindon Advertiser

Guide to ethnographic Material

The following paragraphs provide a detailed description of the material collected during this ethnographic study conducted between August 2010 and October 2011. This complements the material presented in Chapter 2, where sources were mentioned only when relevant to the methodological discussion.

Audio

Three different kinds of audio recordings were gathered in the process of this study: interview recordings, 'vox pops' during events and the sound recordings of speeches during public announcements and events.

I conducted ten long interviews with twelve different people. This is the list of participants with some information about them:

- **Interview I:** 19/08/2010 with Mary Champion, the Mayor of Wootton Bassett, Audrey Wannell, retired Town Councillor, and her husband Christopher Wannell, retired Town Councillor.
- **Interview II:** 12/07/2011 with Janette Brion, retired local resident.
- **Interview III:** 12/07/2011 with Kenneth and Ingrid Nelson, retired local residents.
The recording had to be repeated on 04/08/2011 due to technical issues.
- **Interview IV:** 03/08/2011 with Anne Bevis, retired and local British Legion spokesperson.
- **Interview V:** 18/08/2011 with Owen Collier, town crier and local resident.

- **Interview VI:** 01/09/2011 with Henry Singer, filmmaker and director of BBC documentary on Wootton Bassett.
- **Interview VII:** 15/10/2011 with James Gray, MP for Wootton Bassett.
- **Interview VIII:** 12/04/2012 with Johnathan Bourne, Town Clerk of Wootton Bassett.
- **Interview IX:** 01/04/2014 with Jonathan Pearson, student, who had attended his friend's repatriation in 2009.

Interviews I, IV, V, and VIII took place in the Town Council offices. Number II and VI in a café, IX at the University of Sheffield and VIII and III in my participants' homes.

The interviews lasted from just short of one hour to almost two hours in one case.

Interview V with the town crier was very difficult to conduct because the participants seemed to want to speak to me as if he impersonated only the town crier with his historical but mostly symbolical roles and duties. He indirectly refused to talk to me as a 21st century normal person who lives in Wootton Bassett. During Interview VII I also met a lot of resistance from the participant at first but just as I was going to end the interview, he began to open up more and engage with the questions.

The thirteen 'vox pops' were ad-hoc shorter interviews undertaken during the Ride of Respect event in March 2011 and the Royal event in October 2011. The participants were people attending the event on the High Street of Wootton Bassett. In this case, verbal recorded consent was gained from the participants.

During the following events, I also recorded the speeches and announcements given by official speakers: Sunset Ceremony 31/08/2011, Inauguration of the Memorial Gardens in Carterton 01/09/2011 and the Royal Event 16/10/2011.

Visual

During my fieldwork, I recorded most of the events with my camera, taking pictures of the location and the people taking part. This allowed me to keep track on what people did, where and when and I was able to go back to these photographs afterwards to compare them to each other and analyse them in more detail. The photographs show locations, people, objects and atmosphere. In total I took between 700 and 900 photographs with two cameras, as well as two videos during the first repatriation. The pictures were all taken in public settings where people

were aware of the media and individual people recording the events with their cameras, therefore, no specific consent was being sought or often could have possibly been gained from such a large crowd. In cases when I wanted to take close-up photos of individuals, I asked them directly for permission to take the picture and use it in my work. Some individuals also prompted me to take their picture.

Over the time of my research I also collected several video recordings from other sources. These are:

- Afghan Heroes (2011) 'Ride of Respect Wootton Bassett' (05:55 minutes).
- Afghan Heroes (n.d.) 'Forever Young: A song for Wootton Bassett' (06:21min)
A song recorded by the charity Afghan Heroes and dedicated to the people of Wootton Bassett. (Not the Bob Dylan song of the same title)
- BBC North West Tonight: 'Tomorrow 100th soldier to be killed in Afghanistan will be repatriated through Wootton Bassett' (03:00min) Report about a small Cheshire town's flower club that presents a wreath to Wootton Bassett as a thank you.
- BBC News Live (2009) 'Eight dead in 24 hours' (10:00min)
- BBC Documentary (2010) 'Wootton Bassett: The Town That Remembers' by Henry Singer (60min).
- Channel 4 News (2011) 'Sunset Ceremony marks end of repatriations in Wootton Bassett' (02:08min)
- CNN (2009): 'Wootton Bassett: Standing Up for the Fallen' (26:35min)
- Devizes Video Club (2011): 'Wootton Bassett's Sunset Ceremony' (17:00min) Narrated video to mark the end of the repatriations.
- ITN News (2011) 'Royal Wootton Bassett Royal Accolade' (01:25min).
- Unknown (2011) 'Wootton Bassett Rocks: Wake me up when September ends...?' (07:17min); a charity single recorded on the High Street by the 'Friends of Royal Wootton Bassett' and sold subsequently to raise funds for Help for Heroes.

Text

- Local historic texts and publications.
- Scans of letters, cards, poems and other material sent to the town council.
- Town Council: speeches, announcements, meeting minutes.
- Community Magazine;
- News reporting, local, national and international

- Swindon Advertiser: systematic archival research from February 2005 and then April 2007 to October 2011; including online comments if applicable
- Observation notes: how, when and where, what events

Other

- Canada Highway of Heroes material

Media coverage statistics 2007-2011

The diagram in Chapter 6 entitled ‘Table 1’ is based on numerical data that represents the results of my search of online databases for news items published between 01/01/2007 and 31/12/2011. For this period, I kept track of all print and online media coverage that included the words ‘Wootton Bassett’ and/or ‘repatriation’. The main source of this search were the online archives of the local paper the *Swindon Advertiser*, which also include any publications from their sister papers, e.g. the *Gazette and Herald*. I also searched the online archives of *BBC News*, *The Guardian/The Observer* and *The Independent*. In June 2010, as soon as the University had approved this research project, I set up an online alert via the web service *Wikio* that sent me weekly emails with links to any websites, blogs or news outlets that had used the key words above. The results have also been included in the table below. This additional material came from the following sources: *Channel 4 News* (online); *The Telegraph*; *Independent Press Association*; *TIME*; *Basler Zeitung*; *ABC News*; *n-tv*; *Vancouver Sun*; *The Daily Mail*; *London Book Review*; *The Private Eye*; *Nensbiscuit*; *Focus*; *The Daily Star*; *MoD Defence News*; *Sky News*; *Belfast Telegraph*; *Liverpool Echo*; *Wales Online* and a number of personal blogs.

My search issued the following numbers of items found in the sources mentioned above:

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
January	0	2	2	54	9
February	0	2	10	14	11
March	0	0	9	25	46
April	2	2	2	10	14
May	0	1	14	4	11
June	0	8	10	17	20
July	4	3	40	14	17
August	2	2	27	8	41
September	2	3	18	9	56
October	1	4	8	5	51
November	2	2	48	21	7
December	1	8	23	8	3
Fatalities Afghanistan	42	51	108	103	46
Fatalities Iraq	47	4	1	0	0

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