**‘Military Timescapes’: The Corporeal Experience of Time in an IDF Reserve Combat Unit**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the concept of time among combat reservists in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Most ethnographic studies of temporality as a social experience tend to focus on how time’s ‘passage’ is measured or ‘reckoned’ within varying cultural contexts. By contrast this article looks to the more corporeal and embodied aspects of the human encounter with time. It argues that within Israeli military contexts time is experienced as a near material-like substance that imposes itself – in a very physical way – upon the bodies of combat servicemen. In this sense the ‘military timescape’ is experienced as something of a malleable substance that the physical donning of a military uniform can transcend, alter, and refract. A close ethnographic look as time’s corporeal dimensions offers anthropologists a temporal as opposed to a spatial paradigm for engaging with some of the unique socio-cultural phenomena of militarism, and of military reserve service more specifically.

**Introduction: Time and the Things They Carried**

In the beginning of his now famous semi-autobiographical war novel *The Things They Carried* (1990) Tim O’Brien marshalled the material aspects of the combat experience as a medium through which one can begin to understand the psychological trauma of America’s war in Vietnam. In part, the book’s descriptions focus squarely on the physical and everyday details of combat service in Vietnam. In this way, the weight of an assault rifle (1990:4) alongside cigarettes and lighters (1990: 1) all become grist for the narrator’s gritty tale of war. As the narrative continues however it becomes apparent that soldiers carry other things into and out of combat that are more ephemeral, yet just as weighty. Stories of fear, pain and loss resonate through the physical accoutrements of war.

This article mobilizes a similar kind of narrative overlap between the corporeal and the ephemeral as a way to ethnographically explore the experience of ‘time’ within one reserve combat unit of the Israel Defense Forces. I argue for a reconsideration of how the concept of time itself is understood within the extant anthropological canon. Most ethnographic studies of temporality as a social experience tend to focus on how time’s ‘passage’ is measured or ‘reckoned’ within varying cultural contexts. Following Barbara Adam’s notion of a ‘timescape’, or “the embodiment of practiced approaches to time” (1998: 10), this article looks to the more corporeal and embodied aspects of the human encounter with time. It argues that within Israeli military contexts time is experienced as a near material-like substance that imposes itself – in a very physical way – upon the bodies of combat servicemen. For combat reservists, time becomes corporeal and embodied precisely because it bears its own kind of material 'weight'. In this ‘military timescape’, just as a soldier carries a weapon, a pack, and water, he or she also carries ‘time’ in ways that are distinctly material in nature, and that elicit unique kinds of physical experiences.

This ethnographic and theoretical argument concerning ‘time’ can also be used to shed light on the nature of military reserve service itself. Social scientific studies of the military have generally approached the experience of reserve service through a ‘spatial’ metaphor that focuses on the phenomena of foreign temporary labor (Gazit, Lomsky Feder, and Ben-Ari. 2021, Lomsky Feder, Gazit, and Ben Ari. 2008, Walker. 1992). This literature sees civilians entering into a military framework for a defined yet relatively brief period of time, to perform a series of specific (military) tasks. While this framework is radically different from their home civilian environments, it is only temporary in nature, and soldiers eventually return to their original cultural environments. By contrast, this article observes in the corporeal experience of time a more salient metaphor for anthropologically engaging with military reserve service. In this sense time is experienced as something that not just passes one by, but also as a malleable substance whose physicality can transcend, alter and refract everyday military experiences. This article demonstrates this everyday physicality in the language used to describe time, in the ways in which soldiers experience temporal flow their service, in the physical experience of operational duty, as well as in the ways in which trauma and memory become intertwined with time. Ultimately, I argue that a unitary focus on time's reckoned 'passage' has served to blind scholars to the corporeal and embodied ways in which temporality is experienced by social practitioners.

This ethnographic analysis is based on over a decade of active reserve service within an IDF combat infantry unit. Following in the tradition of other Israeli anthropologists of the military (Ben-Ari, 1989, Feige and Ben Ari, 1991, Gazit.2019, Aran. 1974), I have used this experience as an opportunity to gather ethnographic observations and discursive material. The majority of this social scientific literature, however, was written by officers in the reserves. By contrast, I am a low-ranking infantryman, formally listed as a Chief Sergeant First Class, (although rank has little to no importance in the IDF reserves). I possess no command duties or unique functions within the unit. As part of this research I found myself participating in the daily routines of military life with 30-40 (depending on the day) other reservists. Throughout each call up, I was careful to observe the everyday activities of my fellow soldiers and commanders, and to strategically position myself in critical places and moments where important conversations or debates were being made. I also conducted informal and extended conversations with about half of the soldiers in my immediate unit (15) during the long patrol shifts or on our off hours. We discussed things such as home life, work, politics, and through all that issues of temporality naturally emerged.

As a result, my observations and analysis represent the everyday experiences of a regular combat reservist and are the ethnographic equivalent of what Brown and Lutz (2007) have termed ‘Grunt Literature’ (Silliman. 2008: 239). Indeed, one methodological implication of this research on time is that the anthropology of the military ought to be far more attuned to the "imponderabilia of actual [military] life" (Malinowski. 2002: 14). Details that to some might seem trivial - such as the pain in one's feet, improperly fitted helmets, or the tight feel of a crowded jeep - are all inescapable elements of the military experience, and offer critical context for understanding the experience of time among military reservist

Current reserve service in the Israel Defense Forces is governed under the Reserve Service Law of 2008. Accordingly. following their mandatory period of service, regular combat soldiers are inducted into the reserves twice every three years, where one month of that period is served performing what is termed ‘Operational Activity’ (*Ta’asuka Mivtzait* – Hebrew). In my own infantry unit ‘Operational activities’ were usually conducted somewhere in the Occupied West Bank, performing such duties as; routine patrols, surprise roadblocks/check-posts, guarding in forward bases and observational posts, along with conducting the occasional arrests of -what we were told were - Palestinian militants and terror suspects.

As other anthropologists have documented in conflict zones around the world (Charlton and Hertz. 1989, Maeland and Brunstad. 2009, Basham. 2015), my fellow soldiers and I considered much of this service to be terribly boring with our time split between hiking along the West Bank’s rough agricultural terraces and guarding empty roads and gates. These duties were interspersed with what seemed like inordinate amounts of ‘down time’, where one would simply wait around for briefings to start, vehicles to be made ready, and for one’s shift to begin. This tempo of military life served as the everyday framework through which reserve service was experienced in very corporeal ways. As an anthropologist I used that temporal routine in a discursive manner to quickly jot down notes on a small waterproof notepad I purchased, which I would later transfer to a larger notebook, and finally onto a laptop.

**Reckoning Time and the Anthropology of Temporality**

Anthropologists have long been interested in how cultural context can impact the experience of time within differing social settings. Rather than being an embodied phenomenon, this corpus has generally seen temporality as an ephemeral concept that conditions how humans think about the world around them. That is to say, anthropologists have focused on the ways in which time’s ephemeral passage impacts social experience, to the exclusion of other more embodied or corporeal encounters with temporality.

 Although lacking some theoretical sophistication, functional and symbolic anthropologists in the first part of the 20th century (Hodges. 2008: 400) were keenly aware of how conceptions of time molded social experience. Following Durkheim’s differentiation between “personal time” and “social time”, wherein a subjective experience of temporal flow is transformed into distinct, differentiated and cognizant units of time (Munn, 1992: 95, Durkheim. 1915 [1912]: 11, 441), early anthropologists turned to what they termed as “time-reckoning”. Malinowski for example, looked at how the measurement of time functions to better organize activities between peoples and groups. As he noted, “When the soil is to be tilled, or a long fishing or hunting expedition undertaken, dates have to be fixed by reference to some recurrent natural phenomena which can be foreseen and defined” (Malinowski 1927:203).

For his part Evans Pritchard complicated this functional view of time by differentiating what he termed to be ‘oeceological time’ which reflect man’s relationship to environment, from ‘structural time’, which reflect man’s relationship to one another (Evans Pritchard. 1939: 189). The former views time as an annual repeatable cycle, while the latter is progressive, enabling changes in individual and social status over time. For Evan’s Pritchard, the relational nature of structural time -existing between two persons situated within separate spatial and temporal contexts - impacts the experience of other social institutions, for example notably the calculation of kinship relations across lineages among the Nuer (Ibid: 215-216). Following Evan’s Pritchard seminal analysis, a range of ethnographic studies comparing oecological to structural time were conducted all demonstrating the Durkheimian link between what Dale Eickelman (1977: 39) has described as the individual perception of reality on the one hand and the everyday “rhythms of social life” on the other (Bohannon. 1953, Beidelman. 1963, Panoff. 1969, Morey. 1971). Later theoretical and ethnographic works have followed this focus on the social contexts through which temporality is perceived and made meaningful in the lives of informants. Munn for example sees time as a “symbolic process continually being produced in everyday practices” (1992: 116). In this way people weave themselves in and out of different dimensions of what she terms ‘socio-cultural time’ (Ibid).

From an ethnographic perspective, anthropologists have also been interested in the ways in which conceptions of time have contributed to the cultivation of transcendent aspects of community and ideology (Ramble. 2002). At stake in this process are the broader eschatological, redemptive, and otherworldly promises of religion itself. Anthropologists have shown interest in millenarian and messianic movements that promise both an end-of-time experience, as well as a removal of the individual from the boundaries of time itself (Robbins and Palmer. 2013, Tuminia. 1998, Kravel Tovi and Bilu. 2008).

From Durkheim’s view of ‘social time’, to Malinowski’s ‘Time-reckoning’, and the more current interest in millenarianism, temporality has nearly always been viewed as an ephemeral experience that exists solely in the minds and emotions of social actors. This theoretical focus has added both depth and ethnographic insight to the study of temporality in social contexts. At the same time, it’s nearly monolithic focus on ephemerality has elided other – more corporeal - dimensions through which individuals and communities may encounter time.

Indeed, some scholars have ethnographically hinted at how notions of embodiment and temporality tend to complement each other in social contexts. Haim Hazan for example pointed towards certain extra-ephemeral dimensions of temporality in his 1984 study of an elder care home in Northeast London. For Hazan, changes in the perception of time among the elderly were “linked to changes in external and internal social boundaries” (Hazan. 1984: 574-575). That is to say, time should not merely be understood as a mental construct that reflects a distinct social reality, but rather as a phenomenon that is constitutive of reality itself. Although he falls just short of saying it, Hazan’s argument intimates at a unique physical dimension to temporality. As Markus Balkenhol has suggested three decades later, "people's experience of time…depends to a large extent on the material forms through which time is represented and made palpable" (Balkenhol. 2012: 8).

Limor Samimian-Darash (2012) focused on just this kind of palpability in her work on IDF counter terror training, when she highlighted how the conditioning of a soldier’s body transforms the potential for violence into something that is second nature. Reminiscent of Marcel Mauss (1973: 73) who noted how forms of bodily movement develop over time, Samimian Darash ethnographically alludes to the temporal dimensions of muscle memory, when she highlights how, “the bodily and emotional changes resulting from *only a month* and a half of military training are still embedded within him [the informant], even after his discharge” (Samimian Darash. 2012: 47 Emphasis added). This article adds further ethnographic weight behind Hazan and Samimian Darash’s arguments by empirically documenting the variety of dimensions through which temporality can also be intertwined in corporeal experience in ways that act on the bodies of (military) social actors in distinctive ways.

This focus on ‘corporeal time’ (as opposed to the Durkheimian and more ephemeral ‘social time’) also speaks to current debates within the anthropology of the military and militarism. Over the past decade social scientists have considered various paradigms through which to better understand the unique cultural contexts of periodic reserve military service. In the 1980s political scientists such as for Lissak and Horowitz used a territorial metaphor of “permeable boundaries” to conceptualize the close and interactive relationships that exist between reserve forces and the civilian structure that mobilizes them (Lissak and Horowitz. 1989: 204). Likewise Walker (1992: 308) observed this permeable relationship in noting how reserve forces tend to serve as the main point of contact between most American civilians and the broader military apparatus. More recently, Israeli anthropologists have developed this perspective of “permeable boundaries” into a distinctly spatial metaphor. Specifically, Lomsky-Feder, Gazit and Ben-Ari (2008; Gazit, Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari. 2021) have argued that IDF reservist soldiers ought to be viewed through the prism of transmigration. That is to say, much like migrant foreign workers, reserve soldiers temporarily travel to a different cultural context for a set period, only to return to their original homes and families. In an argument somewhat reminiscent of Malinowski’s Kula ring (Malinowski. 2002: 77), IDF reservists as they travel between spaces, “mediate, and sometimes create critical perspectives between the army and wider civilian society” (Lomsky-Feder, Gazit and Ben-Ari. 2008: 594).

While not denying the importance of this theoretical position, one should note that it has little to say regarding the emic experiences of reservists themselves. How is limited and periodic military service understood for these individuals? Interestingly, the anthropological record has noted how notions of time and space interlap and are often influenced by one another specifically within hunter-gatherer societies. Napoleon Chagnon (2013) noted for example how the Yanomamo Indians utilize geography in referencing notable past events. Likewise distance – or the amount of time it would take to travel between two points in the jungle – was measured using the experience of sleep (Chagnon. 2013: 181-182). These measurements might be subjective, but they were very much enmeshed in the embodied of jungle life.

Borrowing from this overlap between the spatial and the temporal, this article ethnographically highlights how, reservists mobilize time’s corporeal characteristics to in essence revert to their mandatory service in their late teens and early 20s. In this way, I argue, temporality – alongside spatiality - becomes the primary means through which IDF soldiers experience their reserve military service.

Ben Ari and Sion have taken careful note of the “special character of reserve service” (2005:656). Indeed, IDF reserve service is special within Israeli social life. In my unit, young students regularly complained how month-long service stints forced them to drop important tests and assignment, sometimes even pushing back graduation. Likewise, fathers complained about missing their spouses and children. As one friend of mine noted “the real reserve service is performed by my wife, she’s alone with the kids”. Yet with all this they joined the ranks in service to a state whose political goals they may or may not identify with. On the other hand, the academic literature has often elided how the actual behavioral patterns of reservists in the military, are also deeply intertwined with the military culture that has developed in and around mandatory service. In those years young men and women learned to endure discomfort, to enjoy simple camaraderie, and to set aside their own individual (and often ethical) desires in service to a state. This article is sensitive to how these military experiences overlap with one another and begins with an overview of the manner in which soldiers in general linguistically relate to and imagine the experience of time. It will go on to explore how the Israeli military experience itself is bounded by distinct corporeal engagements with time. The article will then turn to some of the embodied modes through which individual soldiers experience temporality.

**The Military Language of Corporeal Time**

Israeli soldiers utilize a variety of linguistic terms to express not just the ephemeral passage of time but it’s corporal experience as well. Some of these terms refer to specific military activities while others highlight the broader flow of military life. Eyal Ben Ari has noted how the language of military service can often index certain professional tasks. During the first Intifada for example he observed how policing terms used in military briefings signified a shift in how the Israeli military contextualized the process of occupation (Ben Ari 1998: 375-6). For Ben Ari, these terms helped to condition how regular reservists experienced the unique kind of violence they were expected to engage in. While these policing terms emerged from the formal command level (top-down), terms that military personnel use to express their engagement with temporality have more informal origins (bottom-up).

*Li’tchon* (to grind) for example is the contemporary Hebrew slang phrase which soldiers use to describe extended periods of operational duty. Likewise it denotes being late switching someone on operational duty. The term is reminiscent of the popular culinary dip “techina” (produced from ground sesame seeds) and evokes images of an individual being “ground down” by endless hours of (mostly boring) duty while wearing heavy gear in all kinds of weather.

During an infantry soldier’s mandatory service, the regulations around guard duty are fairly strict. Soldiers are generally forbidden from eating while on duty and are limited to the water carried in their camelback sacks or canteens. Soldiers in fixed positions are also mandated to stand during most of their shift. While these rules are rarely followed strictly -and certainly not in the reserves where discipline is far more relaxed - they do set the tenor of the kinds of standards expected from soldiers during operational duty. As one former squad commander noted half-jokingly during an interview, “my soldiers were told to stand for 8 hours in one armored position. I asked the company commander if they could at least put on some music during their shifts. He told me, “I’ll allow soldiers to do two things during their shift: guard, and die””. For soldiers, time spent on operational duties whether as a sentry, or on patrol possesses a “grinding” materiality that takes on an almost physical quality. As that same commander noted to me during an informal conversation while on reserve patrol, “you know if someone is late [switching you on guard duty], every minute feels like an hour, but if someone is early, wow that feels like heaven”. Gazit and Grassiani (2021) have theorized that these long hours of mainly static policing and observational duties on the part of military personnel who have been trained for kinetic combat operations, may bear its own kind of corporeal and violent consequences for Palestinian civilians.

One aspect of this ‘grinding’ experience are the messages that soldiers indirectly take in from the graffiti situated on the built environment around them. Anthropologists such as Julie Peteet (1996), Jean-Klein (2001), and Allen (2008) have turned to popular graffiti to understand modes of Palestinian resistance to Israeli military occupation of the West Bank. Yet the graffiti of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict manifests itself on both sides of the political divide. For soldiers in the IDF, and those on combat duties in the West Bank, the graffiti found on nearly every military post references the experience of temporality.

Time’s passage is noted by soldiers with the term “Ad Matai”, meaning in English, “Until When”? For soldiers in mandatory service the term Ad Matai is usually joined with the month and year of one’s induction date, and signifies a desire to be released from service. For example “Ad Matai [Until When] August ‘19”, would refer to a soldier who is set to be released sometime in 2021. Graffiti with this phrase from a variety of years can be found etched into almost every guard post, and position in nearly every military base [Figure]. As one reservist noted in an interview, “it’s like everywhere you go you are surrounded by physical signs that people don’t want to be there, just waiting for their time to be up. That’s also part of the grinding feeling”.

Another term describes an equally visceral experience of temporality. The term *Shavuz*, is an acronym of the Hebrew phrase *Shibur Zayin*, and literally means “*Broken Penis”* in English. Soldier’s often transform the descriptive term into the Hebrew adjective, *Shvizut*, loosely translated as ‘broken dickness’. While Sion and Ben Ari (2009) have noted how sexual and sexualizing humor in the reserves (and perhaps the military more generally) a sense of military masculinity, the literal meaning of the term Shavuz seems to lack any overt sexual connotation. It refers instead to overwhelming feelings of fatigue or depression that tends to emerge after long periods of round the clock military duties.

While the term is more often used in the regular enlisted army, one can still hear it in the reserves. For example, in an effort to avoid kitchen duty, and wanting a slightly more interesting reserve experience, I had asked Dani, in charge of the duty roster, to specifically place me in the morning and evening foot patrols. “Titchan oti [Grind me]", I told him, and placing me on daily foot patrols, grind me is exactly what Dani did. Yet as the days stretched on, these treks across the rocky hills of the northern West Bank became far more physically challenging then I had expected. At the time I was a 39-year-old academic and hiking across boulder filled agricultural terraces, with a heavy ammunition vest and three liters of water, was beginning to get a little irksome. Dani, noticing how I was becoming somewhat withdrawn and depressed, asked half-jokingly, but with unmistakable concern, “you ask to be put in all these patrols, and you’re walking around here all *Shavuz*”. Here, a language of physical discomfort appeared to seamlessly melt into an experience of temporality.

This kind of language does not merely reflect a dry accounting or reckoning of the passage of time. Far from pointing to an ephemeral experience of temporal flow, these terms point to the more physical, corporal, and embodied ways in which soldiers engage with time. As soldiers complain about the long 'grinding' hours of service, or express these frustrations in the graffiti that surrounds their operational positions, they are experiencing not just the ephemeral reckoning of time, but rather the very embodied and corporeal experience of the temporal flow itself. While the experiences of Shvizut and T’china happen on a micro- level, the reservist engagement with temporality occurs within a much wider framework as well.

**The Long Durée of Reserve Service: From Induction to Release**

Meitar -a 32 year old reservist - entered our caravan one evening in the middle of our month-long tour of duty in the West Bank and noted the empty cot next to him. Up to that point the cot was occupied by Tom, both soldiers knew each other well having served together in the same infantry platoon during their years of mandatory service.

“What happened to Tom”, Meitar asked?

“I think he left, that’s what I was told”, I answered.

“Really? That’s it? He didn’t even say goodbye?”, Meitar said sounding upset.

Unsure if he was joking, and not wanting to offend my roommate who I would have live with for two more weeks, I put on a half jovial tone and quipped, “yeah are you surprised? Offended”?

“A little”, Meitar answered, I thought he would say something”.

With that he dropped his rifle on the floor, hopped onto the upper bunk above me and began listening to what sounded like the evening news. Meitar had served with Tom in their mandatory service. Although they were not best friends outside of the military, throughout the years a kind of easy familiarity had grown between them. Meitar was offended that Tom simply didn't bother to say goodbye. Buried within this somewhat banal encounter are the ways in which a sense of military time impinges upon the experience of comradeship within military units.

Comradeship is one of the central tenets of the Israel Defense Forces (as it is in many military organizations). There is a physical habitus to this kind of comradeship that incorporates within it an almost intimate kind of “brotherhood” coupled with a physical willingness to risk one’s own life. Yet in combat units this brotherhood exists in some tension with the broad experience of temporality.

In 1975 military sociologist Charles Moskos observed how the 12-month rotation cycle epitomized the combat experience for most frontline infantry soldiers in Vietnam.

Barring his being killed or severely wounded every soldier knew his exact departure date from Vietnam..It would be hard to overstate the soldier’s constant concern with how much more time – down to the day – he had remaining in Vietnam (Moskos. 1975: 30).

In Vietnam the sensitivity soldiers had to the temporal pace of rotation into and out of the combat theater deeply impacted their relations with their comrades. As Moskos further noted,

Squad members who have returned to the United States seldom write to those remaining behind…The rupture of communication is mutual despite protestations of lifelong friendship during the shared combat experience (Ibid. 29).

The social implications of military rotation within Vietnam operates in similar ways within Israeli military units. As is classically known, most IDF servicemen and women are inducted for set periods of time into mandatory service. This includes 32 months for men and 24 months for women. A whole series of informal cultural signs, mark the passage of time leading to one’s release from mandatory service. For example, a soldier 4 months away from his release date is called a “mem aleph” (an acronym in Hebrew for Machzor Acharon or last cycle).[[1]](#endnote-1) Soldiers closer to their release date are given fewer military responsibilities, such as less guard duty, or a blanket release from kitchen duty. They may also be afforded other kinds of ‘respect’ within their individual companies, such as “permission” to wear certain military accoutrements such as leather rifle straps or leather rifle magazine covers.

While reserve service lacks a similar kind of sensitivity to forms of social respect given to soldiers in mandatory service, the temporal pace of one’s call-up into the reserves is still acutely felt. One usually first receives word of an impending month-long period of reserve service through the unit’s unofficial WhatsApp group. In my case, the group is moderated by the company commander who sent out a message about three months before the official induction date. Soldiers are given time to prepare their families or places of employment for their impending extended absence.

After receiving the official summons through the IDFs reserve service website, soldiers are ordered to arrive at the initial the initial training base at eight in the morning on the day of induction itself. Few however are able (or desire) to come that early with most arriving between ten or eleven in the morning. For the officers and commanders in my resrve unit this tardiness seemed to be a source of a good deal of consternation. The company commander expressed his displeasure towards the latecomers in his introductory briefing on the first day,

Most people came way after they were supposed to show up. That might be fine now, but when we begin operational duties it’s extremely important that patrols leave on time, that guard shifts are switched on time.

Dani the individual designated to organize the duty roster and home leave schedule, stood up and politely interrupted the company commander with a thinly veiled threat towards the reservists present,

Those who aren’t straight with us, who are late to all sorts of things will notice that we also won’t be straight with you. When you ask for leave we may not want to give it, if we can’t trust you to be on time, you might not be able to trust us to give you the time you need.

Although from experience everyone knew commanders usually ‘pretend’ to be stricter on the first few days of reserve service, the threatened impact to one’s home-leave certainly raised the tension in the room. The home-leave schedule, or the amount of time one spends in the army and at home, is of critical importance, and concern for reservists who abandon busy civilian schedules to spend weeks in military service. Any change of the home leave schedule is thus viscerally felt by most reservists. All reservists are given anywhere between 3-5 leave days paid for entirely the military. In this way when soldiers are granted leave in the middle of their month-long stint of service, they do not have to go to work and instead can spend time with their families.

For very practical considerations however there are very good reasons to arrive early to reserve service. On one call-up for a few days of training I had hitched a ride with a few other soldiers. As is traditional, we arrived many hour late, and immediately began signing out equipment from the quartermaster. Nissim a fellow soldier complained how he could not find a helmet and ammunition vest that fit him. The platoon commander immediately replied,

Well, what do you expect? You come hours late and the only equipment that’s left are broken down helmets and vests.

While in the field, soldiers practically live in their equipment. As one commander noted, “your vest is your house, it has to fit you, it has to hold the essentials what you might need”. A vest that is not sized correctly, or a helmet with broken straps is not just an annoyance, or unprofessional, but is also physically painful. Here temporality does not just have disciplinary consequences, but very physical ones as well that are felt in the everyday lives of combat reservists.

Just as temporality is a central factor upon arriving to reserves, it is equally as important for its summation. Many soldiers carefully track the number of days they have left to their reserve service. Yet, this “reckoning” is not merely marking the passage of time until civilian life resumes. There is a certain felt anxiety surrounding this release date. This anxiety is termed in Hebrew *Lachatz Bayit* (Home Pressure). Soldiers can react quite viscerally to this pressure. For example, towards the end of one month of reserve service I once observed a soldier at a checkpoint walk into the middle of the (empty) road, stretch out his arms and scream “I want to go home!”. Here time is experienced as an almost weighted substance that produces its own forms of embodied anxiety

On the day of a unit’s release from service, all rooms and installations have to be cleaned, equipment needs to be counted, checked, and turned over to the next unit of reserves. Of course all of these procedures take time and my own unit quartermaster made sure to emphasize that no soldier would be released until everything was completed. One could see the pressure in the soldier’s eyes as they rushed around the base looking for mops, buckets, and other cleaning supplies.

At the time of release soldiers must return all of their military equipment to the quartermaster. This operation which usually takes place in a large open doors garage-like hall is a scene of controlled chaos. A hundred or so soldiers rush to empty ammunition magazines and push themselves into one line to return their equipment, and then onto another line to return their rifles. Once at the front of the line one is accosted by shouting quarter master representatives pushing individuals to remove items from their kit bags faster. The pressure however does not stem from a concern over discipline, the shouting is not meant to instill any sense of order into the proceedings, rather it is simply meant to propel individuals to move faster and thus go home.

While the notion of temporality within the long durée of military service is certainly something to be “reckoned” it is also an experience that comes with unique physical qualities. As I heard one soldier exhale with relief upon returning his rifle, “finally, I feel so much lighter now”. The soldier was not simply referring to the negligible weight of his M-16 Carbine (approximately a little over 5 pounds), but rather to the ‘weight’ of military service itself. Here, the passage of time towards one release and the broader context of what might be termed the military “timescape” (Adam. 1998) acts as a fundamental component through which military socialization is both actuated and experienced (Hockey. 2017: 83).

Alongside the broader course of reserve military service– from induction to release – time’s ‘malleability’ is also an important aspect of a soldier’s experience of reserve service. In this sense, soldiers see their reserve service as a vehicle through which the passage of time can be manipulated alongside the distinctive behavioral patterns and attitudes that go along with it. For example, during one induction day at the start of a three-day stint of reserve training, I overheard our platoon commander note. “look around you, people put on that uniform and it’s like they turn eighteen again”. As I looked up from organizing my gear I noted how groups of teachers, university students, lawyers, and software engineers were joking, or cussing is if they were indeed once again teenagers. Likewise, one could not help but note how soldiers in their early to mid-thirties would express very youthful behavior through longer periods of reserve service as well. Individual, who in their civilian lives would hold professional careers, and parents of young children, could be found sitting in the recreation room playing video games for hours on end. Others could spend hours on their smart phone’s watching movies or music videos.

This youthful social atmosphere also impacted operational abilities. During an informal interview Maj. Dan, our Company Commander expressed some frustration at the lackadaisical attitude expressed by many reservists towards the condition of their military gear. Giving me a ride home at the end of one month-long stint of reserves, Major Dan noted, “you go into reserves the way you leave mandatory service. If you left mandatory service with a lackadaisical attitude, not caring much about the missions or your gear, that’s exactly what you revert to in the reserves”. Major Dan was not so much criticizing his own soldiers as he was the lax professional standards that one can find in the mandatory ranks of the IDF’s various infantry brigades. In a wider sense though, he was also commenting on how that sense of professionalism becomes intertwined with notions of temporality.

Indeed, the professional capabilities expressed during reserve service are conditioned by one’s operational and training experiences in mandatory service. The learned habitus of gun handling for example that develop during one’s three years of mandatory service are hard to break. Shortly before my first period of reserve service the IDF changed their gun clearing techniques. Until the early 2010’s, upon coming off of duty, soldiers were instructed to vigorously open the actions of their rifles twice, check for an empty chamber, and then press the trigger, ensuring that a live bullet is not left within the rifle. The military later changed this procedure to exclude depressing the trigger. During months of reserve service, I along with many others regularly depressed the triggers while clearing our rifles to the consternation of commanders and firearms instructors. Here the very physical components of muscle memory transcend the temporal flow of decades of subsequent reserve service.

While reservists entering the military for their mandated brief periods of service are certainly shifting the spatial context of their labor, they are also shifting their own temporal experiences. Anthropologists have been adept at documenting different aspects of everyday life among military personnel. Anthropology has generally viewed experiences such as boredom (Harris and Segal. 1985), the use of bawdy language (Ben Ari and Sion. 2005), or the fascination with violence both in training (Ben Ari and Frühstück. 2003) and in combat (Hammami. 2019: S95), as being distinctly influenced by spatial or geographical contexts. That is to say, military behavior is often seen as being prescribed by a particular mission, or within a particular spatial environment (the training field or the check post). This perspective though certainly descriptive, has also tended to elide, how these spatial contexts are deeply intertwined with perspective of temporality. As they return to military service in a spatial sense, soldiers allow themselves to ‘go back in time’ to express not just the behavioral patterns of late adolescence but also the professional attitudes of mandatory service that they developed during their late teens and early twenties. Temporality in this military context is experienced as a malleable substance that the material conditions of IDF service can shape and transcend.

**Time, Boredom and Preparedness in Military Life**

The ways in which individuals engage with temporality within the specific contexts of military duty are also critical in understanding the larger frameworks of military life. Following the unit’s release I hitched a ride home with the unit’s commander, a middle-aged major, who was interested in some of my ethnographic observations. “Daily life is very mission oriented” he remarked, “You live your days in set blocks of time”. Israeli military units on operational duty “work” round the clock in four, eight, and at times even twelve-hour shifts. These shifts usually rotate throughout the week, giving individuals an opportunity to experience a variety of military tasks. Between shifts soldiers are given periods of rest that usually equal or exceed the amount of time on duty. If an individual is on guard duty for eight hours, he is expected to be given at least an eight-hour period of rest before the start of his next shift. This schedule is particularly stressful over lengthy periods of time, and refrains of “they are grinding me down with these 8-8- shifts” can be commonly heard in combat units. Most soldiers much prefer a more normative 8-16 hour cycle of duty which provides for enough time to sleep, and which more closely mimics the regular eight hour work day.

The major was referencing not just this general context of shift duty, but also the ways in which soldiers, take an interest in, and agonize over the shift schedule. In my own unit the shift schedule was posted on the inner wall of the recreational room. It consisted of a piece of regular sized A4 paper with the names of soldiers and their shifts printed on it within rectangular blocks. In many ways this shift schedule is the heart of the day-to-day course of life of military units. The schedule determines not just the amount of time one sleeps, or one’s leave from the military, but also things as diverse as the quality and amount of food one has access to[[2]](#endnote-2), the friendships one can cultivate[[3]](#endnote-3), and even one’s identity. In the army one can be called by a variety of names and monikers. As a friend of mine noted in an informal conversation, “in the army you aren’t really known by your name, you are known by the name that is put on the shift schedule”.

Soldiers look to the shift schedule with both dread and anticipation. One’s shift might include hours of boredom along in a guard post, or conversely it might mean long hours hiking across rocky hilltops with a heavy vest. As I observed on one chilly evening when a soldier walked into the rec-room, turned towards the schedule and with a finger began to search for his name. “another eight hours of road reinforcement, I was just doing that, this never ends”. “Road reinforcement” is a military practice wherein an infantry unit patrols a specific road in the west bank either by foot or in an armored vehicle. On this occasion, all road reinforcements were conducted on foot, and many times necessitated moving on foot along the rocky terraces overlooking a highway in an effort to prevent (or catch) rock throwers. “My feet are killing me”, another friend of mine noted when I remarked about his muddy boots. “we were out there for hours going back and forth”. The blocks of time represented within the shift schedule are harbingers of visceral physical discomfort and this physicality is something that all must relate to. In this way, the shift schedule serves not just as a means of measuring time but rather represents a certain corporeal confrontation with the rhythms of military life.

The sense of boredom and fatigue is a function of temporality that must also be dealt with on a routine basis. For example, on one month long stretch of reserve duty in 2012, all guard posts were manned for twelve hour stretches. During the course of every day the base commander would conduct what is termed an “outpost briefing” [tadrich mutzav – Hebrew]. The briefing would last about 20 minutes and one of the directives would be that soldiers on guard duty must wear their vests, though they were allowed to place their helmets off to the side. Here a twelve hour period of guard duty is measured as a corporeal experience of discomfort. Standing (or even sitting) with these vests for twelve-hour stretches is hot, tiring, and generally uncomfortable. For the first few days soldiers would indeed stand wearing there vests. Invariably though the vests came off, and after a week or so I almost never replaced a guard who was indeed wearing his combat vest.

How to occupy one’s time during long hours of operational duty was also a matter of concern for the IDF reservists. All soldiers bring their personal smartphones with them on duty and spend nearly all their time checking the news, watching videos, or checking their various social digital networks. Many soldiers enjoyed this time off from regular life. As one noted, “finally I get to sit here, no kids, no diapers, no messages from work, finally I can relax a little”. Likewise, the quiet and long hours of guard duty offers reservist students the opportunity to complete assignments. As another soldier asked his commander at a West Bank ‘Pill Box’, “do you mind putting me in the observation tower? I have an important paper I need to finish, and I just don’t have time to do it at home”. Indeed switching him in the tower, I noticed his laptop and notes resting on the concrete surface alongside binoculars and a rifle on the floor.

Others experienced this “time off” with some frustration. Through interviews with combat soldiers Erella Grassiani (2013, 2015) has noted how the physical conditions experienced by soldiers on operational duty tends to contribute to the dehumanization of Palestinian civilians in their daily interactions with military personnel. In making this argument Grassiani (2013: 379) conflates physical conditions, such as heat, cold, and dust, with an ephemeral experience of boredom. My own ethnographic observations indeed resonate in part with Grassiani’s interviews. On the one hand the physical conditions of operational duty to include heat, cold, rain and boredom were central factors shaping the military experiences of the reservists I observed. At the same time however, there were soldiers (myself included) who much preferred spending long periods at roadside checkposts in uncomfortable and difficult conditions, than standing in empty guard positions within the base. While the latter generated boredom and sense of uselessness, the former provided more activity and more of an opportunity to possibly experience some form of combat action. For example, one group of reservists that I observed spent their time at the checkpost trying to learn Arabic with passing Palestinian vehicles. There were also soldiers who engaged contact with Palestinian at checkposts, or on patrols ostensibly to demonstrate Israeli military presence, but also as a means of staving off boredom. Some soldiers were quite critical of this practice. As one soldier I spoke with informally noted with some derision, “what, they want to stop Palestinians because they are bored”? (Manekin. 2017, Hammami. 2019).

Echoing this sentiment other soldiers likewise expressed their distaste for service in the check posts. In one stint of reserve duty our unit was called to set up a surprise and temporary checkpost outside of the northern Palestinian village of Azzun. Positioned relatively far away in an observation post along a highway I did not quite see the activities below and so an hour later as we closed the check post and drove back to the base in a military jeep, I took the opportunity to ask Ran, a senior sergeant present about his feelings on the mission.

“I hate it”, he said, looking at some point past me. “A child came with his dad. The little kids are the worst, they look at you, and you just feel it. You feel awful”.

“You know it used to be much worse”, another reservist broke in. “The checkposts used to be much tougher”.

“I know”, Ran responded. He then began to recount an incident that occurred nearly 15 years ago when an officer instructed him to shoot a tear gas canister into a Palestinian house. “A baby died, he just got caught in the smoke…I killed him, I didn’t know he was there”.

The Jeep became silent. “Do you know what a child who chokes looks like”, Ran continued.

“No, I don’t want to hear about it” I said. But Ran seemed to be stuck in that traumatic moment 15 years ago that he tied into this latest incident during that brief check post.

“He’s all blue and black”, he continued

“That’s it, I don’t want to hear it” I said more insistently. Trying to change the subject, I asked Ran if he ever sought therapy over the incident.

“Never”, he said, and we drove the rest of the way back to base in relative silence.

Looking at Ran sitting in that jeep he appeared to be physically transfixed by past trauma, and for him temporality seemed to transform into something quite corporeal as painful memories of past checkposts took on present significances. As his Vietnam War novel ‘The Things they Carried’ progresses Tim O’Brien meditates on the ways in which stories of military trauma work to contract the experience of time for veterans.

Forty-three years old, and the war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet the remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future (O’Brien. 2009: 36) .

Crammed together in the jeep it became clear, that for Ran this contraction of time was not only an ephemeral experience in the deep recesses of the mind, it was a physical one as well. Ran, (along with all the rest of us reservists) took part in dozens and in some cases hundreds of check posts throughout his service. For Ran (who was forty-one at the time), the hours spent at those checkposts have left indelible marks on his personality, his actions and on the ways he interprets military experiences. Along with others like him, the experience of temporality is not simply a matter of counting the minutes to the end of one’s shift. As Tim O’Brien suggested, the difficult times spent serving at check-posts seem to merge and are woven into a wider set of embodied experiences, related to ethics, memory and the trauma that connects the two.

Hussein Ali Agrama has noted how an experience of temporality itself serves as one precondition for ethical reflection (Agrama. 2012: 145). Though writing in the context of traditional Islamic jurisprudence, the point that temporality serves as a limiting factor on human ethics is just as relevant to the Israeli Defense Forces. Decades of reserve service has given Ran an almost endless amount of time to reflect on the ethics of his experiences. However, temporal distance does more than simply give Ran space for reflection, it also functions as a space for trauma. In a very physical sense Ran seemed to be ‘stuck’ in time, unable to escape the collected memories of his check post experiences. Whether through boredom or trauma ‘temporality’ acts a corporeal entity that physically impinges on the lives and experiences of Israeli reservists.

**Conclusion: The Military Timescape**

 “Sleep in your uniforms tonight guys, you’re on the readiness team. There is going to be an important operation tonight in the village of Azzun” Maj. Dan, our company commander informed us, as my six-man team got off from a few hours of road patrol. “The police special forces are arresting a wanted militant, if they get into trouble and a riot starts, you guys might be asked to come in”. No one really believed him of course, why would the police special forces get into trouble, and if they did why would they call for middle aged reservists? I went to sleep that night in my boots, though considering the chances, took my shirt off.

We were awakened three hour later with the call to gather our gear along with the less than lethal armaments for riot dispersal (gas grenades, rubber bullets etc.). In a rushed haze we got up, I struggled to button my shirt, I felt the seconds counting down, but my fingers were sluggish, I saw others having similar difficulties lacing their boots. The pressure of time comes with its own physical ramifications. At that moment oddly enough, I remembered the lecture a military psychologist gave to my class of fresh recruits 22 years ago. During Israeli basic training simple tasks are timed in seconds. The psychologist noted how new recruits often have trouble doing simple tasks like buttoning shirts or closing pants. “It’s not that you’ve forgotten to get dressed” she noted, it was just the pressures of time and stress playing havoc with our coordination.

Once our team was in the armored jeep we had about a five minute drive to Azzun. Along the way we had to prepare the riot dispersal armaments. I put some stun grenades in my vest, but Tom was having trouble attaching the rubber bullet muzzle extension to the barrel of his rifle. This was an operation Tom had performed countless times throughout years of military service, yet with the stress and the time limitation, his fingers simply refused to cooperate. He had great difficulty attaching the extension to his rifle barrel and we all had trouble helping him locate the correct rounds used to the fire rubber bullets.

The anecdote highlights how the experience of temporality operates along a variety of planes. Rather than seeing time as something ‘out there’ to be counted and reckoned in abstract contemplation, an ethnographic look at the military ‘timescape’, demonstrates how temporality is also ‘within’ us. For (Israeli) soldiers, time itself is a near physical substance that dwells in and around corporeal bodies, and is imbued with the gritty realities of everyday life

The military ‘timescape’ bears its own kind of weightiness, and manifests itself through a range of categories. For one, the very language soldiers use to describe temporality is intertwined with corporeal imagery. “Grinding, ‘Brokenness’, along with the temporally focused graffiti that surrounds the physical spaces of soldiers are all reminders of how easily time can be embedded and embodied in corporeal substance. Secondly, there is the experience of obligation wherein an individual is physically required to periods of lengthy military service, and in doing so must set aside other personal desires and obligations. Thirdly, the corporeal experience of temporality also manifests itself in the daily habitus of military service. From video games in the rec-room to weapons clearing, the physical context of military life makes time variable and allows soldiers to reexperience their late teens and early twenties. The weightiness of time is also embodied in the experience of boredom and the discomfort of long hours on operational duty. Here the heaviness of one’s cumbersome vest, or the sweat drenching one’s back as soldier’s hike along steep terraces, are an ever-present aspect of military temporality. Finally, time’s physicality also manifests itself along the ethical vectors of military service. The past stories of violence and loss that combat soldiers carry with them are as corporeal as the packs on their backs. Stories of ethical dilemmas work to contract time, and as reservists make the conscious and embodied act of donning their uniforms thus beginning their weeks of service they are not only changing their spatial context -from one profession to another - but are also in a physical sense traveling through time to a younger era.

Through humor, pain, panic, but also trauma Israeli soldiers encounter the very physical manifestations of temporality. In ways large and small the human condition seems to be bounded by distinct encounters with time. Specifically, an ethnographic look at IDF reservists underscores how that encounter is not just ephemeral – residing in the recesses of the human mind and imagination – rather it is also a very physical experience. Anthropologists must also consider the embodied and corporeal ways through which individuals engage with time. Here, time is something that not only passes one by, but it also materially impinges upon one’s life and experience.

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1. Inductions into combat units occur every four months. Each four-month period is termed a machzor (cycle). The result of this is that the release from combat units also occur every four months. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Those who are not on duty or who have time off can usually eat better food in the dining room [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Those who are on duty or time off together have more opportunities socialize with one another [↑](#endnote-ref-3)